

Mount Polley Mine's Headquarters Raided Six Months After Massive Spill

Written by Joan Russow
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By [Sarah Berman](#)



Hazeltine Creek on the ground. Photo courtesy Kieran Oudshoorn

On February 3, law enforcement raided the headquarters of Imperial Metals, the mining company responsible for a massive mining waste spill in British Columbia's central interior. The search could potentially lead to millions of dollars in fines and even jail time.

By volume Imperial Metals' Mount Polley spill ranks among the largest mining leaks in the world. A tailings pond dam holding back 25 million cubic metres of waste collapsed on August 4, 2014, sending an avalanche of toxic sludge containing lead, mercury, arsenic, and selenium into salmon-bearing waterways.

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Six months later, more than 70 officials executed search warrants at Imperial Metals' Mount Polley and Vancouver offices, as well as [the offices of two engineering firms](#) involved in the dam's design and maintenance.

Tuesday's

search and seizure collected evidence for a joint investigation by RCMP, Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, and BC's Conservation Officer Services.

Inspector Chris Doyle said the conservation agency is leading the inquiry. "The RCMP is part of the investigative team, and ultimately the team as a whole will submit to provincial and federal Crown Counsel," he said. It's then up to the crown to press charges.

In the same week, Mount Polley's sister mine Red Chris received a temporary permit to start mining copper and gold despite ongoing [concerns raised by some members of the Tahltan First Nation](#). The Red Chris wastewater pond is designed by AMEC, one of the companies raided by conservation services. AMEC took over as the engineer of record at Mount Polley in 2011, and until recent months was also the engineer of record at Red Chris.

That permit goes against the [findings of an engineering review panel](#), released last week, that recommended new mines move toward "best available technologies" like "dry-stack" or "filtered" tailings rather than sludgy wastewater ponds.

The review found design flaws were the root cause of the Mount Polley disaster. Authors pointed to unstable glacial soil underneath the tailings pond and the dam's steeply sloped walls as contributing factors to the spill. In a press conference last week, review chair Norbert Morgenstern explained that if building on an unstable glacial lake deposit was the "loaded gun," then building up the dam walls at a steep incline "pulled the trigger."

The BC government announced it would require all mines to [determine the stability](#) of "foundation materials" by

June 30

to ensure the disaster is not repeated.

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