

Kamloops group seeks water-protection order over proposed Ajax mine

Written by Joan Russow

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<http://vancouver.sun.com/news/local-news/kamloops-group-seeks-water-protection-order-over-proposed-ajax-mine> Published on: August 14, 2017

| Last Updated: August 14, 2017 6:00 AM PDT Inks Lake south of Kamloops would be used for storage water collected from a tailings facility at the proposed Ajax copper-gold mine at Kamloops. The open-pit Ajax copper-gold mine is proposed for a site near Inks Lake south of Kamloops. TBA / PROVINCE A Kamloops community group opposed to mining firm KGHM's proposed Ajax mine wants the Interior Health Authority to issue a protection order preventing possible water contamination from the facility on the argument an environmental assessment of the project was inadequate. The University of Victoria Environmental Law Centre plans to file an application with the Kamloops Public Health Unit Monday requesting the unit's drinking water officer issue a prevention order regarding potential hazards from the project on behalf of the Kamloops Area Preservation Association.

The environmental assessment "didn't look at all the possible sources of contamination, didn't look at all the possible pathways (for contaminants) to human beings and all the wells that are going to be impacted," said Calvin Sanborn, the UVic ELC's legal director, who is filing the application along with law student Anna Poezzhaeva. Kamloops Area Preservation Association chairwoman Paula Pick said air and water quality "in all their complexities" are among the group's biggest concerns. "We just knew they didn't do enough work looking at the risks to drinking water," Pick said. "And I don't even think they knew how many people are dependent" on two community wells mentioned in the report. Sanborn argued that at the very least the water-protection officer could "order an operation not to take place until an absolutely comprehensive (environmental) assessment is done."

The Ajax mine proposal is for \$1.3 billion open-pit copper-gold mine on 17 square kilometres within the southern limits of Kamloops' municipal boundaries, a couple of kilometres away from residential neighbourhoods. Operations would involve carving 65,000 tonnes per rock per day out of the ground to produce some 64,000 tonnes of copper and 130,000 ounces of gold over a

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23-year mine life. Ajax has gone through a joint review by the B.C. Environment Assessment Office and Canadian Environmental Assessment Authority, which issued a draft report Aug. 1 that concluded the project “is not likely to cause significant adverse environmental effects to surface water,” or groundwater, if KGHM follows promised mitigation measures. The joint federal, provincial report on Ajax is open for public comment until Oct. 10, with a decision to come after that, but Sanborn characterized the project “on the cusp of approval.”

The UVic ELC application is an attempted end run on the environmental assessment to get authorities to consider the findings of its expert, hydrologist Gilles Wendling, whose report identified potential shortfalls in the assessment. Wendling’s report contends the environmental assessment didn’t consider the cumulative effects of potential contaminants on water, didn’t consider run-off as a potential source of contamination in a nearby creek and didn’t consider seasonal fluctuations in concentrations of potential contaminants that could flow from the site.

The environmental review identified concerns about increased concentrations of arsenic in groundwater at one location due to mining activity, but the company committed to evaluating groundwater quality and setting up “a resolution policy” to deal with complaints about water quality. In Wendling’s assessment, “proposed mining activities will likely create health hazards by modifying the quality of the drinking water” for some 150 residents downstream of the proposed mine. The Ajax project has proved contentious in Kamloops and surrounding communities. In July, Kamloops city council voted to oppose the project. And the Stk’emlupsemc te Secwepemc First Nation has disagreed with the conclusions of the joint environmental review, declaring Ajax as “detrimental and too risky for the health and well-being” of Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, according to a report in Kamloops This Week. That statement was issued jointly by Tk’emlups Chief Fred Seymour and Skeetchestn Chief Ron Ignace, according to the report. depenner@postmedia.com twitter.com/derrickpenner