

By Larry Pynn, VANCOUVER SUN August 7, 2014

<http://www.vancouversun.com/news/metro/Retired+fish+biologist+Quesnel+Lake+calls+independent+public/10098019/story.html>



An aerial view shows the damage caused by a tailings pond breach near the town of Likely, B.C. Tuesday, August 5, 2014. The pond which stores toxic waste from the Mount Polley Mine had its dam break on Monday spilling its contents into the Hazeltine Creek causing a wide water-use ban in the area. Damage from a tailings pond breach is seen near Likely, B.C., Tuesday, August 5, 2014. A tailings pond that breached Monday, releasing a slurry of contaminated water and mine waste into several central British Columbia waterways, had been growing at an unsustainable rate, an environmental consultant says.

Photograph by: Jonathan Hayward , THE CANADIAN PRESS

The former provincial fisheries biologist responsible for Quesnel Lake called Thursday for an independent public inquiry into the Mount Polley tailings pond breach to ensure that no party escapes blame and to help prevent a similar occurrence.

“An independent inquiry outside of government would be in order,” Jack Leggett said Thursday in an interview from Williams Lake. “If government was negligent, they’re not so likely to reveal that, right? I’m not saying they are. But if it was an independent body, it would be easier for them to make a public report and say errors were created, be it government or the mine or whatever.”

Leggett retired in 2003 after about 30 years with the Ministry of Environment as a fisheries biologist and manager for the Cariboo region, with responsibility for the recreational fishery in Quesnel Lake.

“It’s a catastrophe, no doubt about that,” he said. “I was sick when I heard about it. It’s a pristine place and one of the deepest inland fiord lakes in the world. To have something like this happen, of this magnitude, it’s tough to comprehend.”

Retired fish biologist for Quesnel Lake calls for independent public inquiry into mine disaster

Posted by Joan Russow

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Quesnel Lake has a unique late-maturing population of rainbow trout, fish that are prized by anglers from around the world for their size, he said. Bull trout are also in the lake, he added, and a significant spawning sockeye run which must swim past the inflow from Hazeltine Creek — heavily scoured and polluted with heavy metals and contaminants from the tailings pond since the spill. Young smolts are swimming the other way.

Hazeltine Creek was expanded from about 1.2 metres wide to 45 metres wide as a result of the tailings pond failure, according to the Ministry of Environment.

The pre-season forecast for the sockeye return to the Quesnel system — including Horsefly River, Quesnel River and Mitchell River — is 845,000 to 2.95 million.

“I don’t know why it happened or how it could happen, but it did,” Leggett said. “It’s a wake-up call for British Columbia to make sure these settling ponds and so forth are more strictly monitored and it doesn’t happen again.”

Leggett said the effects of the heavy metals and contaminants such as arsenic from the tailings pond failure early Monday will be long-lasting, noting that sediments that were carried into Hazeltine Creek will continue to wash down into Quesnel Lake. “It’s going to take a long, long time for it to get out of the system,” he said.

“Heavy rains will bring the sediments and contamination into the system for years and years.”

As of Thursday, the environment ministry said “the flow out of the breach has decreased dramatically, but has not completely stopped.”

Leggett finds it difficult to believe the mess will be cleaned up, saying: “I think the costs would be so prohibitive, I don’t think it would be possible to do that.”

Coho salmon and rainbow trout were known to spawn in Hazeltine Creek, he said, while Polley Lake had rainbow trout.

Fisheries and Oceans Canada, which is leaving investigation of the disaster to the province, has, as a “precautionary measure,” banned recreational fishing on the Cariboo River from the confluence of the Quesnel River to the confluence of Seller Creek, and Quesnel River downstream of Poquette Creek. The ban does not affect aboriginal food, social and ceremonial fishing.

Environment Canada spokesman Mark Johnson said the department is “currently assessing the situation with respect to federal environmental and wildlife laws within its jurisdiction, and has opened an investigation.”

On Wednesday, Mines Minister Bill Bennett told a news conference in Williams Lake that there are about 20 active mines in B.C. with tailings ponds. The Vancouver Sun has repeatedly asked the ministry for a full list of active and closed mines with such tailings ponds along with copies of the latest provincial inspection reports on them, but is still awaiting the information.

In 2010, rising waters broke through a private dam at Testalinden Lake near Oliver, destroying five homes. The Sun reported at the time there were 1,985 dams in B.C. and 97 per cent of them are privately owned. Of all the dams, 289 were deemed by the province to be at

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high or very high risk of causing severe consequences to people, property and/or the environment should they fail. The Testalinden dam was considered at low risk.

The Ministry of Environment has issued a pollution abatement order to Imperial Metals, owner of Mount Polley mine. The company has filed a preliminary environmental assessment report and is ordered to file a more comprehensive report by Aug. 15.

Failure to comply with the pollution abatement order could result in fines of up to \$300,000 and six months in jail.

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