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Mining proposal for Skagit River headwaters in B.C. sparks outcry from congressional Dems, Gov. Inslee



Logging is shown in the “donut hole,” a Manhattan-sized patch of public land left unprotected because of historic mineral... (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times, 2018)

By [Evan Bush](#)

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Nine members of Washington state’s congressional delegation, all Democrats, [called Wednesday for the U.S. Department of State to intervene](#) in a simmering dispute with Canada over a company’s proposal for exploratory mining in the headwaters of the Skagit River.

The river begins in British Columbia and [winds its way](#) through Washington state to Puget Sound.

“We write in opposition to a proposed mining development in the Upper Skagit River Watershed,” reads the letter to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, before it outlines potential harms to Washington’s tourism and recreation economy, public health and vulnerable fish populations, among other concerns.

Sen. Maria Cantwell organized the letter. Sen. Patty Murray and Representatives Suzan DelBene, Rick Larsen, Derek Kilmer, Pramila Jayapal, Kim Schrier, Adam Smith and Denny Heck are also listed in support.

Their request to the State Department comes on the heels of a cascade of sternly worded letters from tribal leaders, elected officials and environmental organizations to B.C. officials. The mining proposal has stressed a typically affable relationship between Washington state and British Columbia, and could test a longstanding treaty between the U.S. and Canada over the Skagit River.

“Deny this permit,” [wrote Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan](#) to British Columbia Premier John Horgan.

Mining in the headwaters of the Skagit “represents an unacceptable risk to a river that remains a bulwark to dwindling salmon,” wrote Washington Gov. Jay Inslee.

The mining applicant, Imperial Metals, “would irreparably damage the water quality of the Skagit River,” [added Benjamin Joseph](#), Chairman of the Sauk-Suiattle Tribe.

All told, more than 100 elected officials, tribal leaders and environmental organizations on both sides of the border have registered their opposition after the company filed for exploratory drilling permits in March, according to a tally by Tom Uniack, the executive director of conservation nonprofit Washington Wild.

“We’re very hopeful, we have a lot of partners,” said Jeremy Wilbur, a senator for the Swinomish Indian Tribal Community, one of several tribes and First Nations engaged on the issue. “We feel industrial mining and logging in this sensitive part of the Skagit headwaters ecosystem must be rejected.”

Imperial Metals, which is known for an environmental disaster at its Mount Polley mine in eastern British Columbia, [applied for a permit to explore for gold](#) in an area known as the “donut hole” last December. The Canadian government notified Seattle officials of the proposal in March. It’s currently under review, after a public comment period.

The company’s application shows that it hoped to access drill sites using roads carved through the area during controversial [clear-cutting logging operations last summer](#).

The donut hole is a Manhattan-sized patch of public land left unprotected because of historic mineral and logging rights. Provincial parks encircle the donut hole, and some conservationists argue it should be part of those parks. Alpine snow near and within the donut hole feeds the Skagit’s headwaters.

The Skagit River is the top salmon-producing river in Washington state, and its waters churn through hydropower turbines at Ross Dam, among others, to bring Seattle much of its electricity. Its upper waters are also home to endangered bull trout.

Conservationists cried foul after the B.C. loggers last summer began felling trees in the donut hole, at the behest of the B.C. government. But the possibility of mining was always conservationists’ greatest fear because even small amounts of dissolved metal, particularly copper, are toxic to salmon.

Elected officials south of the 49th parallel have argued that mining in the Skagit’s headwaters is at odds with a 1984 treaty and agreement.

In decades before the treaty, Seattle City Light sought to generate more electricity from the Ross Dam, along the Skagit River, by building the dam higher. But a taller dam would send Ross Lake flooding into Canada. B.C. environmentalists were not keen on the idea. After protests, Seattle and B.C. came to an agreement in 1984. Seattle halted the dam project. In exchange, the Canadians agreed to provide Seattle inexpensive hydropower through 2065.

The U.S. and Canada cemented the local deal with a treaty. The agreement created the [Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission](#) (SEEC) to conserve the watershed on both sides of the border, enhance recreation there and seek its protection. The B.C. premier and Seattle mayor [each appoint four commissioners to lead SEEC](#).

Last year, SEEC commissioners learned of ongoing logging operations in the Skagit watershed and raised concerns with B.C.’s forestry ministry. The commissioners also alerted Durkan.

After Durkan wrote to Premier Horgan last summer, the ministry put future timber sales planned for the donut hole on hold. Logging that was already approved continued, and was finished by summer's end.

This April, B.C. mining and forestry officials met with members of the SEEC commission, including Thomas Curley, a Canadian appointee to the commission.

"It was a productive meeting," Curley said, adding that forestry minister Doug Donaldson committed to a halt on timber sales in the donut hole and to deactivate logging roads there.

"Restoration of vegetation and land contours on the blocks which have already been logged will occur in the next two years," Curley said. Officials also promised to notify SEEC of any changes planned for the area.

With the logging issue seemingly resolved, attention is now fixed on Imperial Metals' application to drill for mineral deposits for as many as five years inside the donut hole, according to a document describing its potential project. The company would set up trenches and build settling ponds for the exploratory drilling work in an area believed to have gold and copper.

Tribes, First Nations, governments and environmental groups, fearing the impacts of mining on fish, have been working for months to organize opposition to the project.

Wilbur said the Swinomish community worries the mining project could have "ripple effects" into the Salish Sea. Wilbur said Swinomish leaders believe that the B.C. government must meaningfully consult with tribal governments about the project's potential effects.

"We depend on salmon for ceremonial, subsistence and commercial fishing activities. The Imperial Metals gold-mining operation threatens those activities. That's our way of life," Wilbur said.

Seattle City Light, meanwhile, [sent a list of more technical concerns to the B.C. chief inspector of mines](#), outlining possible environmental impacts of mining such as erosion and sedimentation from trail construction, water diversion for mining, heavy metal impacts from drilling and impacts on recreation, among others.

The SEEC commissioners have [asked for mining to be prohibited in the watershed](#), Curley said. The commission wants the B.C. government to help facilitate the purchase of mineral rights within the donut hole, so the area can be preserved for habitat and recreation.

Earlier this year, Imperial Metals CEO Brian Kynoch said the company needed to explore to see where its donut-hole mining rights fit into the company's overall plans. Last year, he told The Seattle Times that he recognized the company would have to come up with a sufficient plan to mitigate harms to fish in order to obtain permits to mine.

"You need to come up with a plan that's not going to harm the salmon," he said.

It's not clear when the B.C. Ministry of Energy, Mines & Petroleum Resources will decide on the Imperial Metals application. The ministry did not immediately respond to a request for comment Tuesday.

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