

Eight U.S. senators ratchet up pressure on B.C. over mining's effects on American rivers

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This entire valley, about 26 miles southeast of Hope, British Columbia, drains into the headwaters of the Skagit River, the most important... (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times, file) **More**

By [Evan Bush](#)

Seattle Times staff reporter

Eight U.S. senators ratcheted up pressure on British Columbia Premier John Horgan as worries persist over the province's mining practices and their impacts on rivers that flow into the United States.

In a bipartisan letter to Horgan, senators from Washington, Alaska, Idaho and Montana wrote that they “remain concerned about the lack of oversight of Canadian mining projects near multiple transboundary rivers that originate in B.C. and flow into our four U.S. states,” documented U.S. steps to protect these watersheds and asked for B.C. to “allocate similar attention, engagement and resources” to the issue.

The letter is signed by Sens. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, James Risch, R-Idaho, Jon Tester, D-Montana,

Steve Daines, R-Montana, Patty Murray, D-Wash. and Maria Cantwell, D-Wash.

The new letter carries political clout. Risch is the chairman of the Senate's Foreign Relations committee. Murkowski, who organized support for the letter, chairs the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The letter was also sent to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, governors of states the senators represent and a number of government agency heads on both sides of the border.

"This letter, it's a first step. And it builds a record for what the members of Congress have done over the last handful of years regarding concerns in these transboundary rivers from B.C. mining," said Jill Weitz, campaign director for Salmon Beyond Borders, which promoted the letter among lawmakers. "The pressure this will put on the premier will hopefully apply more pressure to the federal government and the Trudeau administration."

The letter is filled with subtle rebuke, written in the delicate language of diplomacy.

B.C. government would not comment on the record.

Until recently, the International Joint Commission (IJC), which resolves disputes between the U.S. and Canada under the 1909 Boundary Waters Treaty, could not meet because Canada had not appointed enough commissioners. The senators pointed out the "absence of this engagement opportunity" in their letter.

The senators also told B.C. that several U.S. agencies had formed a group to address mining concerns and "determine the specific mechanisms necessary to safeguard U.S. economic interests and resources."

They also noted that Congress recently appropriated \$1.8 million for stream gauges to monitor water quality on rivers that cross the international border, which could detect impacts of upstream mining.

"It very much puts them on notice. One of the chief concerns is the fact that B.C. has inadequate monitoring on their side of the border," Weitz said.

The Southeast Alaska Indigenous Transboundary Commission said it was encouraged by the senators' involvement in the issue.

The group of 15 federally recognized tribes of Southeast Alaska wrote in a news release that indigenous people were disproportionately affected by

transboundary issues and that tribes deserved a voice on whether projects should proceed.

“We need more than a mention in a letter. Business as usual continues,” said Jennifer Hanlon, the commission’s vice chair.

The senator’s letter follows [outry last month from congressional Democrats](#), Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan and many others over a mining proposal in the headwaters of the Skagit River in British Columbia.

More than 100 elected officials, tribal leaders and environmental organizations on both sides of the border declared their opposition to the project after the company filed for exploratory drilling permits, according to a tally by Tom Uniack, executive director of conservation nonprofit Washington Wild.

Michael Jamison, of the National Parks Conservation Association, said each state represented in the letter has similar concerns to those voiced about the Skagit.

“We all have the same problem. We have a bad-acting upstream neighbor who has carved us out of the conversation in order to enable the industry and make us their settling pond,” said Jamison. “B.C. has been able to compartmentalize this problem too long. It’s a systemic problem.”

Many of the projects affecting the other states are further along than the Skagit.

Across the border from Montana, where Jamison is based, a Canadian company in the Elk River Valley of British Columbia has been mining coal for decades and has continued to expand, despite environmental concerns downstream, he said.

“These are mountaintop-removal coal mines — unbelievably vast,” Jamison said.

Runoff traveling through waste rock near the mining sites collects a mineral called selenium, [which flows downstream into Lake Koocanusa and the Kootenay River at levels that have alarmed researchers](#), according to the Flathead Beacon. In excess, selenium is toxic. It can affect fish species’ ability to reproduce and alter their skeletons, Jamison said.

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