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First Nations chiefs: We will defend the land

By [Erin Hitchcock - Williams Lake Tribune](#)Published: **May 13, 2010 8:00 AM**

Aboriginal leaders are vowing to do whatever it takes to stop Taseko Mines Ltd.'s proposed Prosperity Mine from being built.

"We will fearlessly carry on the proud legacy of our ancestors," says Tsi Del Del (Alexis Creek) Chief Percy Guichon. "The Tsilhqot'in will continue the fight to protect our land with whatever means necessary."

Guichon notes that "whatever means necessary" doesn't include violence, and would instead include legal action, building alliances with other First Nations and environmental groups, and keeping the pressure on the federal government to turn the mine project down.

"I think we have to exhaust those means before any other action is taken."

He notes it's too early to say if there would be roadblocks if the project is approved and says such action would be up to the people.

"If the process doesn't work for you or legal means don't work for you or other forms of persuasion (don't work), what people usually resort to is roadblocks, but it's too early to say. ... I'd like to take things a step at a time and stay positive. You've always got to keep your options open."

He says he feels "very positive" about what the panel's report will say.

"I think they heard loud and clear what the Tsilhqot'in Nation view on the mine is," he says, adding that many others are in support of the Tsilhqot'in's view and professional advisors and biologists spoke at the federal panel review hearings about their opposition to the mine.

The federal panel reviewing the project has a deadline of July 2 to present a report to the federal environment minister, who will then make the report public.

The federal government and responsible authorities, which have no deadline to make a decision, would then decide whether to approve the mine.

If it gets approval, the gold-copper mine project would be built about 125 kilometres southwest of Williams Lake at Fish Lake (Teztan Biny), which would be drained and replaced with a new lake as part of Taseko's fish compensation plan.

"Just because the panel hearings are complete does not mean it is done," Guichon says. "We all look forward to the report from the panel in 60 days."

"This is far from over," says Grand Chief Stewart Phillip, president of the Union of B.C. Indian Chiefs.

"The federal panel review process is representative of a minor skirmish. The final battle may take place on the land itself."

Phillip says Taseko's proposed artificial lake is a "corporate-branded aquarium," as its temperatures would need to be artificially controlled, and is "an absolute preposterous idea."

He says the panel hearings were frustrating since the panel wouldn't look at Tsilhqot'in jurisdiction, control, and influence over the Tsilhqot'in's traditional territories and their unextinguished aboriginal rights and title.



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processes, then the only thing left is for us is to defend the land itself,” Phillip says, adding that while it’s not known yet how the land will be defended, he says possible defense could come in the form of roadblocks, physically stopping Taseko from building the mine, and closing the area off to others. He notes, however, it all depends on the circumstances.

Phillip notes that in February, the Okanagan Indian Band set up a camp blockade near Bourleau Lake to stop Tolko Industries from harvesting trees in the Browns Creek area.

The courts later handed down an enforcement order to remove the band members, but they have still refused to leave.

“It’s just a different set of circumstances, a different place in the province, but it’s the same issue. ... If we get arrested, we get arrested. It’s another day at the office. We will continue our opposition. ... And it’s the same with the proposed destruction of Teztan Biny. The Tsilhqot’in people have said it’s not going to happen. We can’t allow it to happen.”

Taseko vice-president of corporate affairs Brian Battison says comments about stopping the company from building the mine are regrettable.

“This seems to be not so much about mining, but about who has authority over Crown land — the government or First Nations,” he says. “That has been answered in the Supreme Court of Canada, that the government has responsibility and authority over what happens on Crown land.”

The TNG says the hearings were emotional and overwhelming, packed with concerned Tsilhqot’in members, from children as young as five or six to elders in their 80s, imploring the panel not to support the destruction of Teztan Biny.

The TNG says Teztan Biny is a sacred and ceremonial site for Tsilhqot’in people and a highly productive lake fishery and hunting ground that has sustained Tsilhqot’in people for generations.

The TNG says key fundamental departments presented information to the panel about fundamental problems with the project that could lead to significant environmental impacts, even with Taseko’s proposed mitigation measures that include replacing Teztan Biny with a new lake and stocking it with fish.

The TNG says Transport Canada told the panel that the project would have significant adverse effects on navigation, including the loss of access by the Tsilhqot’in to Teztan Biny.

The TNG says the Department of Fisheries and Oceans told the panel the project failed to meet the basic requirements of its “no net loss” policy for the destruction of fish habitat.

TNG experts — fish biologist Dr. Gordon Hartman, geochemist Dr. Ann Maest, and Dr. Kevin Morin, an authority on acid-rock drainage — also expressed their concerns about the mine to the panel.

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