

[Autos](#) [Careers](#) [Classifieds](#) [Homes](#)

When business and beauty collide

To make mining operations work, they will have to kill Fish Lake

By PETER ZIMONJIC

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FISH LAKE, B.C. -- It's shortly after sunrise and the air over Fish Lake is cold, crisp and still.

The eastern faces of the Taseko mountains at the south end of the valley are just beginning to reflect the soft morning light. Wild trout jump through the glassy surface of the water, disrupting the jagged reflection, begging to be pulled into a campfire breakfast by the First Nations who have gathered here to honour a land they have lived off for more than 5,000 years.

Cecil Grinder, a Chilcotin shaman, healer and spiritual guide who calls this land sacred, says that to touch the water in the lake is to touch the womb of the creator. Whether or not one is spiritual, it's difficult to argue the sentiment when faced with the simple, striking beauty of this wilderness vista.

"Water is a living thing just like you and me, like the moose, the animals the trees, even the ground," says Grinder. "It has particles in there that are just like a spirit, like me breathing.

"If we destroy this water, if we contaminate this water, we are killing a living thing. It would be like me stabbing you in the heart."

Grinder is among many First Nations worried Fish Lake could be wiped from the map to make way for a massive gold and copper mine.

The Prosperity mine, a proposed development by Taseko Mines Limited, is currently undergoing federal and provincial environmental assessments to determine if the 20-year project should proceed.

This mine is unique because its development would not be possible without a little-known change to federal mining regulations.

Mining projects do not only pull gold and copper from underground, but toxic waste rock that needs to be stored under water to prevent it from releasing toxins into the air and surrounding environment. It's illegal to dump waste into fish-bearing waters, so mining companies have traditionally built their own man-made tailings ponds.

But a 2002 amendment to the Fisheries Act allowed four lakes and a creek already destroyed by mines, to be reclassified as "tailings impoundment areas."

"Our understanding of the original intent was to serve as a grandfathering process for mines that historically had been dumping waste into lakes," says Ramsey Hart of Mining Watch Canada, an industry watchdog. "Using them to reclassify clean lakes for new mines was supposed to be the exception, but unfortunately we are seeing them become the norm."

According to Mining Watch, the federal government has approved six additional lakes since the first five were reclassified under the "schedule two" amendment.

Another 10 bodies of water have been earmarked for destruction since, including Fish Creek and Little Fish Lake, which would become the tailings pond for the proposed Prosperity mine.

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Stand on the shores of Fish Lake or Little Fish Lake and it's almost impossible to count to three without a fish jumping out of the water somewhere within view.

According to an Environmental Impact Statement submitted to the federal government by Taseko Mines, Fish Creek and its tributaries have a population of almost 75,000 rainbow trout and Little Fish Lake has 5,000. Both bodies of water empty into Fish Lake, which has another 85,000 trout.

It's not really even accurate to describe throwing a line and hook in the lakes as fishing, it's more like catching, as trout are easily pulled from the water. The fish are roughly a foot long and taste clean and healthy.

If the Prosperity mine gets the go-ahead, Fish Lake would be drained and used as a dumping ground for non-toxic waste rock. Along its southern shore, a 25-metre-high dam would be built across the valley and water would be pumped in to cover Fish Creek and Little Fish Lake.

Once flooded, the 2002 changes to the federal mining regulations would allow the creek and lake to become the basis for the tailings pond, destroying the fish habitat and surrounding meadows used by moose and deer.

The creek bed between Little Fish Lake and Fish Lake is an area frequented by grizzly bears. Trees can be found with deep grizzly claw marks, trees that could be submerged under tailings if the mine is approved.

As a part of the proposal to destroy these lakes and creek, Taseko Mines had to agree to create alternative fish habitat. The fish compensation plan involves building a new lake farther down the valley. The new lake will be called Prosperity Lake, after the mine, and the fish from the destroyed lakes will be moved there over time.

Brian Battison, vice-president of corporate affairs for Taseko Mines, told Sun Media the practice is a proven method of managing a fishery and Prosperity Lake will be bigger and deeper than Fish Lake, allowing the trout to grow to a healthy population.

"Stocking of lakes is a very common practice," says Battison. "There will be spawning habitat created. There will be a self sustaining fishery created at Prosperity Lake."

But Chief Marilyn Baptiste of the Xenigwet'in First Nations, the band leading the fight to stop the development, has her doubts about the new lake.

"The mining company want to put our wild trout in residential school to see if they'll survive in a lake that's foreign to them," says Baptiste. "It's another part of the assimilation process and now they want to do it to our wild trout."

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To see Fish Lake first hand, to travel through what is to be the tailings impoundment area by horseback and look upon the meadows and near virgin forests, could leave visitors shocked at the destruction proposed here. But the issue is not that simple.

"The world can't do without mining and metals and commodities ... We need metals, it's our standard of living," says Elizabeth Gardiner, vice-president of technical affairs for the Mining Association of Canada. "We should be thankful Canada has a lot of metals and minerals in its crust."

According to the association, 19% of the goods Canada exported in 2008 were minerals and metals. Another 70% of Canadian port volumes and 55% of rail freight revenues were generated by the mining industry. And over the past five years, the Toronto Stock Exchange has handled 81% of worldwide mining equity transactions.

Combine all this, says the association, and it means Canada's mining industry was responsible for \$40 billion or 3.3% of Canada's GDP last year.

If the Prosperity mine is approved, it would be the second largest open-pit copper mine in Canada.

According to a study commissioned by Taseko Mines, the federal government would receive \$1 billion and the provincial government \$2.3 billion in revenues over the 20-year life of the project.

The report claims consumer spending in B.C. will rise by \$303 million annually and each household in the province will end up with about \$60 more in their pocket each year.

Pierre Gratton, president and CEO of the Mining Association of British Columbia, says a new major metal mine has not opened in the province since 1996. Two such mines are scheduled to close in the next few years and Gratton says Canada needs a new project to take their place.

Taseko Mines has spent \$100 million up until now to get the mine off the ground. Battison says he is optimistic the project's environmental assessment will be approved and pave the way for development and the economic benefits that will follow.

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But there is no guarantee. In 2007 a similar project in B.C. called the Kemess North mine, also a copper and gold deposit, failed to pass its environmental assessment, killing the development.

According to Mining Watch, Northgate Minerals was seeking permission to use the schedule two amendment to apply for permission to dump waste into Duncan Lake. The Xeni Gwet'in First Nations are hoping Taseko Mines will similarly fail to pass its environmental assessment and Little Fish Lake and Fish Creek never make it onto schedule two.

According to an archeological study commissioned by Taseko Mines, aboriginals have been continually using the lands and lake for 5,500 years. The island on the lake has evidence of ancient dwellings and the Xeni Gwet'in say destroying the water here would be akin to erasing their heritage.

The Xeni Gwet'in have regular gatherings on the shores of Fish Lake where they perform ceremonies intended to reaffirm their connection to the land, sacrificing fish to the creator in an act of respect for the gifts the water here has given their ancestors.

Their shaman, Cecil Grinder, tells the Xeni Gwet'in children they should bathe their faces in the lake and pray for the water to expunge their hurtful thoughts, their illnesses and their misdeeds.

In 2007 the Xeni Gwet'in won a court decision to stop clear-cut logging in the area and received a declaration of rights to hunt, trap and catch and use wild horses. The decision did not include an aboriginal right to fish on Fish Lake but Chief Baptiste says that if the Prosperity mine is approved, filing a rights and title case for fishing here will be the next step in the battle to stop Prosperity.

Chief Baptiste says she sees the destruction of the lake as killing a part of her, and if it looks like that is to happen, she is prepared to go the whole way: Take her own life, and make a statement in the process.

"It will never be the end of it," she says. "If those steps fail I would be will to ask my kinfolk to bury me here. If that would stop it, that's what I would ask."

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Mining by the numbers

\$11.5B paid in taxes and royalties by the mining industry to the federal and provincial governments in 2008.

\$40B contributed to Canada's GDP by the mining industry in 2008

\$1,347 average weekly wage of a mining industry worker in 2008

19% of global spending for mineral exploration in Canada in 2008 -- making it the top country.

81% of global mining equity transactions were traded on the TSX in 2008

70% of Canadian port volumes are attributed to the mining industry

55% of Canadian rail freight revenues are generated by the mining industry

55% of global mining companies are listed on the TSX

SOURCE: Mining Association of Canada

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