



Council of Canadians submission to the Federal Review Panel

Introduction

Vancouver-based Taseko Mines Limited is seeking permission to develop a large open pit mine called the Prosperity Gold-Copper Project in Tsilhqot'in territory, 125 km West of Williams Lake.

Taseko Mines has disproportionately represented the socio-economic benefits of the Prosperity Mines project while severely downplaying the detrimental environmental and social impacts of the project in its environmental impact assessment and in its public statements to the Williams Lake community.

The company says it will generate approximately 500 direct jobs over the span of its 20-year operation. In order to do so, it proposes to destroy vital water resources that the Tsilhqot'in peoples have relied on for nutritional, cultural and spiritual purposes for centuries.

The Council of Canadians – an organization with 25 years of experience in working with communities to protect water resources – is concerned about the impacts on the watershed and is seeking permission to bring our concerns to the Federal Review Panel public hearings in Williams Lake.

The draining of Teztan Biny and contamination of the watershed

Taseko Mines Ltd proposes to drain Teztan Biny (Fish Lake) in order to stockpile rock waste, and use Fish Creek and Little Fish Lake as tailings impoundment areas for a gold-copper mining project called Prosperity Mine.

Teztan Biny is home to an estimated 85,000 rainbow trout. The mining company proposes to compensate for the loss of Teztan Biny under the requirements of the Fisheries Act by creating an artificial lake called Prosperity Lake. The Tsilhqot'in National Government has rejected the proposal, and according to a study by environmental organization Mining Watch¹, Prosperity Lake will need to be four to five times larger than proposed in order to compensate for the loss of fish habitat.

¹ Mining Watch, "Review of the Prosperity Mine Aquatic Impact Assessment":
http://www.mwatch.koumbit.org/sites/miningwatch.ca/files/MW_Review_of_Prosperty_Aquatic_Impact_Assessment.pdf

Taseko's Environmental Impact Statement minimizes the extent to which the entire watershed will be threatened by the proposed project. The draining of Teztan Biny and the dumping of toxins into Fish Creek and Little Fish Lake will eventually contaminate the Taseko River, a tributary of the Chilko River which joins the Fraser River. The Fraser River has the largest runs of sockeye salmon in the world and is an important source of food security to First Nations groups within the watershed.

Environmental justice

The Council of Canadians believes water governance in Canada must be informed by the notion of environmental justice. In other words, it is important for decision-makers to recognize that some communities in Canada are disproportionately affected by the impacts of environmental destruction. The proposed Prosperity Project is a prime example of a development that would force First Nations communities to bear a disproportionate share of the resulting environmental costs, while short-term jobs and prosperity are promised to non-Indigenous segments of the community and large profits are made by shareholders of Taseko. The proposed creation of Prosperity Lake will not offset the environmental and social damage caused by the Prosperity project.

The Tsilhqot'in people have lived in the area for thousands of years. The Tsilhqot'in governments oppose the environmental destruction being proposed by Taseko and were not consulted by the Province of British Columbia when it approved the project.

The Council of Canadians demands that the authority of the Tsilhqot'in government be respected, and the principle of environmental justice be recognized.

Socio-economic impacts

The Tsilhqot'in National Government has argued that the average household in the area lives on less than \$10,000 a year. Their well-being is contingent on the ability to fish, pick berries and hunt in the area. The proposed destruction of Teztan Biny and the surrounding area will drive many in these communities to abject poverty.

The area is sacred to the Tsilhqot'in. It contains pit houses and burial grounds that would be destroyed by the project. The Tsilhqot'in also pass on their cultural heritage by teaching younger generations to fish in Teztan Biny. Its destruction would be a severe attack on the community's cultural history and integrity.

The Council of Canadians has spoken to the labour council in Williams Lake, who have pointed out that many of the jobs by Taseko's Gibraltar Mine have not been local jobs and have not addressed local unemployment rates. There is no indication of the mine producing the jobs that are needed locally. Public comments made by Taseko officials confirm that they expect to look outside the local community to fill higher paying positions for the proposed Prosperity project.

Thirteen-year extension

Taseko announced in November that it would pursue a 13-year extension to the project, but has not revised its environmental impact study to reflect the potential extension, which will expose the watershed to greater amounts of toxins over a longer period of time than specified in the EIS.

Impacts of climate change

The EIS does not take into account the effects of climate change.

The BC government states that annual average temperatures have risen by 1.1 degree Celsius in the BC interior. According the BC environment ministry,² this has meant a reduction in snow depth and snow water content, while lakes and rivers have become free of ice. The province attributes increased salmon deaths during migration – up to 50% during recent warm periods – to climate change and predicts higher mortality rates in the future.

Among future impacts to the watershed the province predicts reduced precipitation, loss of water due to evaporation, increased river temperatures, and increased river flood risks which will be detrimental to fisheries and wildlife in the area. Increasing water shortages will have impacts on local food production, tourism, and numerous other sustainable economic activities.

The effects of climate change make it all the more important to protect lakes and rivers in BC from the type of outright destruction being proposed by Taseko Mines Ltd.

The Council of Canadians urges the Federal Review Panel to prevent permanent damage to an important Canadian watershed and respect the authority of the Tsilhqot'in by rejecting the proposed mining project.

About the Council of Canadians

The Council of Canadians is a public interest advocacy organization that promotes environmental, social and trade justice in Canada and abroad. With over 70 chapters across the country, the council works at the community level to support local struggles to protect the environment and the public interest. Among them, our chapter in Williams Lake has been actively involved in community social and environmental issues.

The Council of Canadian's national water campaign calls for a national water policy that recognizes water as a human right and a public resource at all levels of government in Canada.

² <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/epd/climate/about/impacts-bc.htm>