

Fish lake will have to make way for mine, firm says: Taseko vice-president stresses it would not be realistic to try and preserve a lake alongside a copper and gold deposit

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A Vancouver-based mining company says it must destroy a fish-bearing lake and creek in order to exploit its Prosperity copper-gold deposit about 200 kilometres southwest of Williams Lake.

"The lake is right beside the deposit," John McManus, vice-president of operations for Taseko Mines Ltd., said in an interview. "The reality of trying to preserve the lake and have the mine is just not realistic."

This is the second mine proposal currently before the B.C. Environmental Assessment Office seeking to destroy a fish-bearing lake. Kemess is about two years into an environmental process that seeks to dump waste rock and tailings into six-kilometre-long Duncan Lake to expand its gold-copper mine about 400 km northwest of Prince George.

McManus said Taseko's plan for the Prosperity site is to build a dam from waste rock and tailings just above Fish Lake on Fish Creek, effectively killing both. He described Fish Lake as shallow and measuring about one kilometre in length and supporting a population of rainbow trout.

Asked if people will consider the destruction of a lake a backwards environmental step for B.C. mining, McManus said: "Some will, some won't. You have to take a balanced approach to everything."

"I'm not trying to downplay the importance of the lake. Nobody wants to . . . get rid of a lake. But we're talking about having large industry and an economic generator in the area. It's difficult to put your finger on a spot on the map of this province where you can do any significant development that doesn't somehow affect a fish or fishery."

Kate Glover, spokeswoman for the Ministry of Environment, said last week the ministry would make no public comment on the two mine applications while they are in the process of an environmental assessment.

She did note that Fish Lake is home to an estimated 85,000 rainbow trout, of which 4,100 to 4,900 are caught annually.

Garry Alexander, project assessment director with the Environmental Assessment Office, said, while it is not uncommon for major industrial projects in the province to have some impact on fish habitat, it is unusual to lose a lake outright.

The Xení Gwet'in First Nation in the Nemiah Valley, which stands to gain economically from a mine in its territory, has so far said it wants to be closely consulted on the proposal and has not yet taken a formal position against it despite the planned destruction of the lake.

Environmentalists were quick to decry the plan, though. "If you polled British Columbians, they'd say killing lakes is not on," said Joe Foy of the Western Canada Wilderness Committee. "Surely, there are minerals in areas where you don't have to kill lakes."

Foy also called B.C.'s environmental assessment process a rubber stamp for industry, and called for a new independent system of reviewing potentially damaging projects. "Projects always get through," he said of the current process. "We have to do something about that."

Alexander confirmed not one of 134 projects reviewed by the environmental assessment process has been rejected since the legislation took effect in 1995. However, he said proponents

voluntarily withdrew 13 projects, or 10 per cent of the total, due to the challenges of providing more information or the need for

project redesign to meet environmental requirements.

Scott Cameron, owner of Harry's Sporting Goods in Williams Lake, said the wild rainbow trout are small at Fish Lake but the fishing is good. "A family can go up to Fish Lake and catch lots of fish, and the kids are happy."

He added that, while he can appreciate the importance of mining jobs, he is also concerned about the environment. "You keep doing that sort of thing and you have no lakes and fish left. When does it end?"

McManus estimated the Prosperity mine would have a 20-year lifespan, producing 100 million pounds of copper and 250,000 ounces of gold annually. The company would spend \$700 million to get the mine up and running, and would employ at least 400 full-time workers, he promised.

Michael McPhie, president of the Mining Association of B.C., said he does not believe that the potential loss of Fish and Duncan lakes represents a trend, but reflects strong mining activity in response to world demand.

He added that Taseko and Kemess would have to create or improve fish habitat elsewhere as part of a federal fisheries no-net-loss policy. As such, he said "one could argue the industry is not destroying fisheries habitat at all."

Added McManus: "There are lots of things you could do to improve the rainbow trout fishery of the Interior."

A study released by federal fisheries biologists in 2004 strongly criticized their own department's no-net-loss policy, adopted in 1986.

A random study of 52 developments and one million square metres of compensation habitat stemming from developments such as mining, forestry, highways, and urban development on both government and private lands across Canada found that 86 per cent of the time, developments either exceeded the allowable level of damage to fish habitat -- on average, by a margin of 389 per cent -- or came up short in terms of habitat compensation.

Taseko bills its Prosperity property as "one of the largest undeveloped copper-gold deposits in Canada." Initial exploration dates back to prospectors in the early 1930s. Taseko acquired the property in 1969 and exploration drilling continued in the 1970s and 1980s.

By 1998, Taseko had advanced the project to the pre-feasibility and feasibility stages. However, the project was put on hold in 2000 due to poor metal prices.

Based on improving metal prices, Taseko applied to the province in early 2005 to re-activate its proposal for the Prosperity mine and received an extension until April 30, 2007.

Taseko Mines also owns the Gibraltar copper-molybdenum mine north of Williams Lake.