

Spotlight on Southeast Alaska Mines: Kensington Mine

OVERVIEW

The Kensington underground gold mine is owned and operated by Coeur Alaska, a subsidiary of Coeur Mining Inc. and has been producing since 2010. The mine operates above the northwest side of Berners Bay at the foot of Lions Head Mountain, a sacred site for the Auk Kwaan Tlingit people. Berners Bay is heavily used for recreation, sport, and subsistence hunting and fishing. It provides spawning and rearing grounds for herring and hooligan, feeding opportunities for marine mammals and migratory birds, and intact habitat for mountain goats, brown bear, and moose. Currently 4.5 million tons of tailings are held back by an 88 foot dam comprised of waste rock that is supposed to last forever. Coeur Alaska has begun an application to the Forest Service seeking to double the amount of tailings stored there.

PROJECT DETAILS

LOCATION

Between Juneau & Haines

45 miles NW of JNU and 35 miles S of HNS



AREA

12,335 acres

controlled by the mine



TIMELINE

10 years

life-of-mine



ORE

2,000-3,000 tons

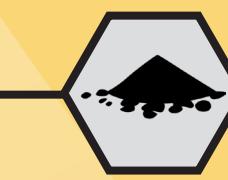
per day of gold ore processed



TAILINGS

438,000 tons

per day produced



TAILINGS DAM

88 feet currently

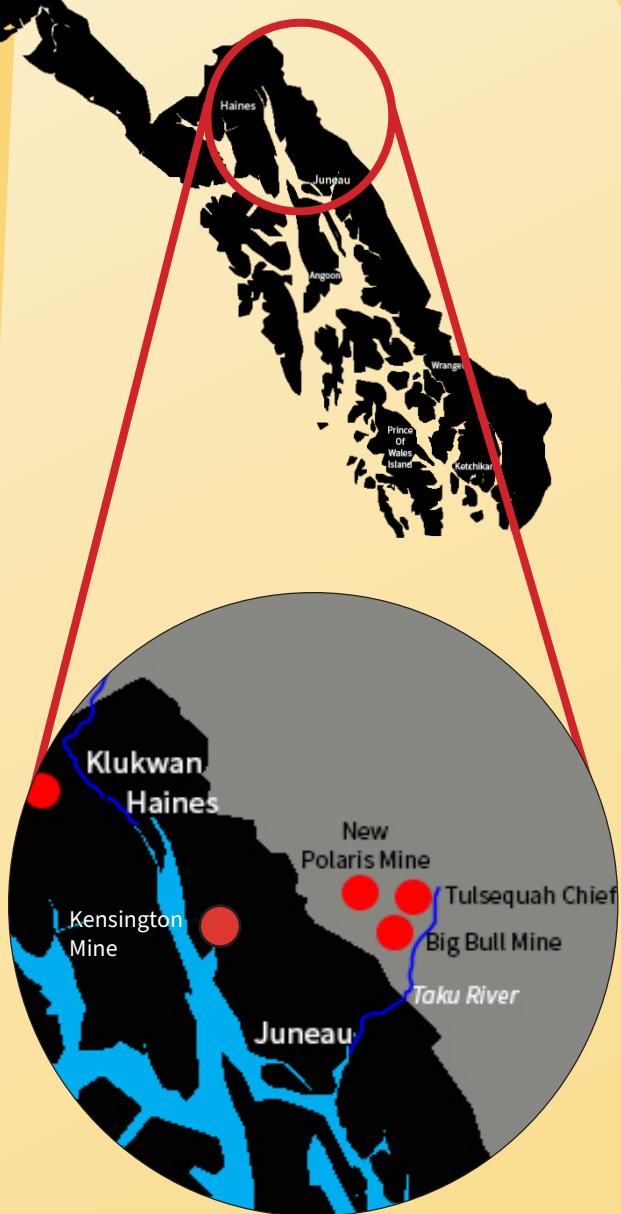
(applied to add 36 feet)



WASTE ROCK

300,000 tons

per year produced



REASONS FOR CONCERN



DESTRUCTION OF AQUATIC HABITAT

The Kensington Gold Mine is unique in the United States. It is the only mine that was allowed to dump tailings into an existing natural lake by a Supreme Court decision. The lake, Lower Slate Lake, was re-designated as a "tailings treatment facility". All life that once existed in Lower Slate Lake has been extinguished and replaced with a lake of toxic tailings.



HARM TO WATER QUALITY AND AQUATIC LIFE

On August 8, 2019 the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) fined Coeur Alaska over \$500,000 for more than two hundred permit violations, unauthorized discharge of acid rock drainage, multiple sampling violations, failure to conduct required monitoring, assessments, inspections and trainings, failure to use proper sample handling and analysis procedures, and failure to report releases of nitrate compounds from 2013 to 2017 among other violations. The EPA noted that mine water discharges that are not properly controlled and treated can harm water quality and aquatic life.

NONCOMPLIANCE WITH ENVIRONMENTAL REGULATIONS

The most recent compliance data show that acute copper standards are still routinely exceeded in Johnson Creek. Other exceedances include: acute copper standards exceeded in Slate Creek in 2018, manganese that exceeded the human health consumption of water and aquatic organisms standard in November 2018 and continues to do so, exceedances in the acute water quality standards for copper in both January and November 2018 in Sherman Creek, and exceedances of nitrate, sulfate and total dissolved solids during 2018 in Ophir Creek with similar exceedances in previous years. Additional exceedances occurred in Lower Slate and Johnson Creeks. A recent check with EPA Enforcement and Compliance shows that Coeur Alaska is still out of compliance by its continued failure to maintain proper records and submit required reports.

FAULTY TAILINGS STORAGE DESIGN

Kensington Mine employs a similar type of tailings dam that failed at the Mt. Polley Mine in 2014, the worst mine disaster in Canadian history. After the Mt. Polley failure, the Canadian government convened an Expert Panel to avoid a similar failure in the future. The Expert Panel concluded that submerged tailings technology needs to be discontinued. In describing the future mining industry, the Expert Panel defined Best Management Practices (BMP) as "filtered, unsaturated, compacted tailings and reduction in the use of water covers in a closure setting."

IMPACTS ARE EXPANDING

In 2019 Coeur Alaska submitted an amendment to its Plan Of Operations to extend the life of the mine another 10 years. The mine will likely last much longer, but the company is trying to limit the analysis of environmental affects by only asking for authorization in 10-year increments. Under this plan, another 36 feet would be added to the dam and another dam would have to be constructed to protect Upper Slate Lake from contamination. This additional dam would be removed at closure (if and when that happens) and Upper Slate Lake would be merged with the tailings facility, transforming two natural lakes into one big toxic tailing storage facility for eternity. The Forest Service will issue an Environmental Impact Study for public review sometime in early 2021.

TAKE ACTION

Decrease Demand for Gold Mining

- **Buy Gold Responsibly:** Most gold is used for jewelry. Avoid purchasing first-hand gold jewelry by seeking out recycled gold or abstaining from it altogether.

Learn More

- **More Information:** www.seacc.org/berners-bay
- **Kensington Fines:** <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-and-coeur-alaska-settle-over-alleged-kensington-mine-pollution-discharges>
- **Mt. Polley Report:** <https://www.mountpollyreviewpanel.ca/sites/default/files/report/ReportonMountPolleyTailingsStorageFacilityBreach.pdf>
- **Compliance Data:** <https://echo.epa.gov/detailed-facility-report?fid=110055091699>

Get Involved

- www.seacc.org/berners-bay



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