



Protecting clean water, healthy communities, and the Boundary Waters  
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## **COPPER MINING HAS A HIGH RISK OF POLLUTION**

### **DISASTERS HAPPEN NO MATTER HOW MUCH PLANNING IS DONE OR CARE IS TAKEN IN OPERATION**

#### **THE BOUNDARY WATERS IS TOO VALUABLE TO RISK A DISASTER**

Major failures in mining and other industrial activities have (i) devastated priceless ecosystems; (ii) destroyed lives, livelihoods, and communities; and (iii) cost many billions of dollars.

- On August 4, 2014 the tailings basin dam at the Mount Polley copper and gold mine in British Columbia burst, with the result that 24 million cubic meters of mine tailings and waste water laden with heavy metals (including arsenic, mercury, zinc, lead, cadmium, and selenium, among others) wiped out several kilometers of Hazeltine Creek, filling it with debris, and then poured into Quesnel Lake. One of the largest sockeye salmon nurseries in British Columbia, Quesnel Lake is a vital rearing area for salmon that spawn in the world-famous Fraser River system. The heavy metals deposited in the lake will be taken up in the water column and the food chain, and may destroy one-quarter of British Columbia's sockeye salmon in the years ahead. Local residents who draw their drinking water from Quesnel Lake and other nearby waters are seriously concerned about the health impacts of consuming the metal-laden waters.
- In August 2014, 40,000 cubic meters of wastewater from the Buenavista Mine in Mexico spilled into the Bacanuchi River and the Sonora River. The wastewater carried sulfuric acid and probably cyanide. The event prompted 88 schools to close temporarily. The mine officials did not report the accident to the authorities for more than 24 hours, when the residents noticed the orange-colored river water. The disaster paralyzed the agriculture and ranching industries in the area and left 22,000 people along the river without a regular running water supply. In mid-September 2014, the Sonoran government reported that the mining company was continuing to discharge toxic water into the Sonora River.

- A landslide occurred at the huge Bingham Canyon open-pit copper mine in April 2013. This is what the mining company had to say, according to the Reuters news service:

A landslide at Rio Tinto's Bingham Canyon mine in Utah extended farther into the pit than predicted, and there was greater damage to equipment than previously estimated, Rio's Kennecott unit said on Friday. Kennecott Utah Copper, which operates the mine . . . said it had not yet determined the impact of the slide . . . or a time frame for resuming mining operations.<sup>1</sup>

More than two hundred people lost their jobs—more than half of them permanently.

- At Summitville Mine in Colorado pollution spilled from a containment pond and impacted all aquatic life for 18 miles in the Alamosa River.
- At Mike Horse Mine in Montana 1 million cubic yards of metals-contaminated mine waste is piled behind an eroding tailings dam at the headwaters of the Blackfoot River, an important trout river; a failure of a prior dam poisoned the river for years, causing fish kills and environmental damage for miles downstream.
- A leak in a Charleston, West Virginia storage tank that held a chemical used in the coal mining industry polluted the water supply of three hundred thousand people for several weeks in early 2014; economic harm has reached \$61 million and continues to increase.
- A vast landslide (about one square mile) caused by heavy rains on a slope that had been clear-cut by loggers where geologists had warned logging should not occur destroyed much of the community of Oso, Washington in March 2014.
- Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant in Japan melted down and released radioactive materials following an earthquake and tsunami in March 2011; officials incorrectly assumed the plant was safe because no previous tsunami had ever been high enough to reach the plant site.
- BP (British Petroleum) oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 caused by the explosion and sinking of the Deepwater Horizon oil rig was the largest accidental marine oil spill in history.
- Exxon Valdez oil spill occurred in Prince William Sound, Alaska in 1989 when an oil tanker struck a reef and spilled crude oil; it is considered to be one of the most devastating human-caused environmental disasters. Oil is still present on the beaches,

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/12/rio-utah-slide>

and the herring population, which is vitally important commercially and ecologically, has collapsed.

- The I-35W bridge across the Mississippi River suddenly collapsed in Minneapolis in 2007 because of structural deficiencies.
- The Montcalm Mine, Ontario closed abruptly after structural changes and unforeseen ground movements threatened the underground mine.<sup>2</sup>
- Tailings dams for mining waste storage fail; on average one major tailings dam failure occurs each year.<sup>3</sup>
- Crude oil pipeline leaks, tank car derailments, fires, and explosions occur in the U.S., Canada, and around the world with disturbing frequency.

A tsunami or a landslide may not be likely in Twin Metals' hypothetical "giant underground city" but no one can predict the sort of negligence, or accident, or "act of God" that could cause a disastrous polluting event. Even with good faith efforts people cannot foresee or prevent all bad things. Allowing metallic sulfide-ore mining to occur in the priceless watershed of the Boundary Waters carries the risk of disaster.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.timminspress.com/2009/06/08xstrata-indefinitely-closes-montcalm-mine-2>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/environment/alaska-gold/tailings-dams-where-mining-waste-is-stored-forever/>