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Development in Alaska/British Columbia Transboundary Watersheds: A Campaign for International Joint Commission Involvement

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Abstract

This case study in policy advocacy examines a campaign based in Southeast Alaska known as “Salmon Beyond Borders.” Run by a regional coalition of environmental organizations, indigenous tribes, local municipalities, commercial and sport fishing groups, policy experts, scientists, and concerned citizens, the Salmon Beyond Borders (SBB) campaign seeks a formal referral for International Joint Commission (IJC) involvement from the U.S. Department of State and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs. SBB would like the IJC to study the cumulative impacts of mining development in the region’s transboundary watersheds and offer non-binding recommendations from which the U.S. and Canada can negotiate policy implementation.

As the longest undefended border in the world, the U.S. and Canada have historically collaborated to ensure transboundary water issues are resolved under the Boundary Waters Treaty of 1909. The transboundary region of Northwest British Columbia and Southeast Alaska, however, has never been reviewed by the IJC. With rapid, large-scale mining development now taking place in three transboundary watersheds (of the Taku, Stikine, and Unuk Rivers), Alaskans fear there is no policy mechanism in place to protect downstream resources from the potential negative impacts of B.C.’s mining development boom. Alaska’s billion-dollar commercial fishing industry and billion-dollar tourism industry rely on the clean water and intact ecosystems provided by these three transboundary rivers. With the recent Canadian deregulation of both provincial and federal environmental laws, these B.C. mining developments are expedited through the permitting process

to proceed with their operations. The August 2014 tailings dam failure at B.C.'s Mount Polley mine underscored the concerns of Alaskans when millions of gallons of toxic tailings flowed into the Fraser River watershed.

As a participant observer, I have been directly involved in the work of SBB since September 2014 and have become intimately familiar with the progress of the campaign. This case study examines and evaluates the advocates, policy, political atmosphere, and strategy (i.e., tactics and messaging) of the Salmon Beyond Borders campaign. As an exploratory paper, it contributes to an evolving understanding of policy advocacy campaigns and policy creation and enforcement as it relates to transboundary externalities.