

Canada's lakes slowly being converted into mining waste dumps

Posted Sep 27, 2009 by ■ [Stephanie Dearing](#)

Canada has an abundance of water which has long been a source of food and income, as well as many providing many different recreational pursuits. Lately, Canada has been putting some of its lakes to a new use - containment ponds for mining wastes.

Home to the largest inland lakes in the world Canada's fresh water lakes and rivers have not only made Canada famous for these water holdings, but have played a historical role in the development of the nation. But over the years, these pure, pristine waters have been coming under increasing risks from human activities. The Council of Canadians says that Canada lacks federal leadership when it comes to protecting and conserving Canada's premiere resource.

It was only 30 - 40 years ago when scientists realized that pesticides and other industrial chemicals were accumulating in Canadian fresh water fish, severely impacting animals that live on fish, such as Osprey. The realization that pesticides not only travelled through the environment but also accumulated in some species led to a concerted effort to reduce the amount of chemicals entering the food chain. Today many fresh water fish species are still not safe to eat, being contaminated with furans, mercury and other chemicals. And now Canadian lakes are facing a new threat - that of being turned into waste holding sites for mine tailings.

Alarms have been blaring in Canada over this issue since 2007. The process has been underway since 2002. Sandy Pond is the latest lake that will be turned into a mining waste holding facility. The lake, situated on Newfoundland's Avalon Peninsula was allowed by the government of Canada to become the 3rd lake to be used as a containment pond. In February 2009, the government published the change in regulations to allow the new use of the lake. According to decision, the site will receive

"... approximately 381 000 tonnes per year of residue ... The residue is a waste by-product produced from the proposed nickel-processing facility to be constructed in Long Harbour, Newfoundland and Labrador. The proposed residue deposition would interfere with the public's right to navigate on Sandy Pond in its entirety. Sub-aqueous deposition of the residue into Sandy Pond will inhibit the acidification of the elemental sulphur contained in the residue and therefore limit the production of a hazardous substance. Dams will be constructed along the shoreline of Sandy Pond to ensure that the residue remains under 1 m of water."

The proclamation noted the opposition of the public to the use of the lake as a containment pond, but decided that using the lake for that purpose was the most "economical" solution.

MiningWatch Canada reported in 2007 that the reclassification was occurring because mining companies were asking for permission to use the lakes as waste sites. In a convoluted process, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO), the federal body responsible for protecting fish habitat in Canada, is often the first Canadian agency to review the request. If the DFO approves the request, it is then sent over to Environment Canada. Should Environment Canada approve the request, it recommends that parliament change existing regulations to allow the use of the lake as a waste containment facility. If parliament approves the project, they change the rules



Photo by species_snob

A view of an oil sands patch in Fort McMurray, Alberta

to facilitate the request that was under review. Other government ministries might be involved as well, such as [Transport Canada](#).

In an older case, after the government permitted a lake in Northern British Columbia to be used as a containment pond for the *Red Chris* mine, a court challenge was launched against the decision in 2006 by [MiningWatch Canada](#). The lower court had ruled for MiningWatch Canada's arguments, but a subsequent [Federal Court](#) appeal by the government of Canada and Imperial Metals Corp. in 2008 saw the Federal Court overturning the lower court decision. The stock of the company, Imperial Metals Corp., went up with the news. The decision can be appealed in Canada's Supreme Court, but there is no word whether or not environmental groups will undertake the challenge.

In May of this year, a Federal Court judgement ruled that Canada must collect and publish data on the toxins contained in mine wastes. [MiningWatch](#) reported that

"... The Federal Court sided with the groups [MiningWatch, EcoJustice and Great Lakes United] and issued an Order demanding that the federal government immediately begin publicly reporting mining pollution data from 2006 onward to the National Pollutant Release Inventory (NPRI). The strongly worded decision describes the government's pace as "glacial" and chastises the government for turning a "blind eye" to the issue and dragging its feet for "more than 16 years."

Which means that the government must now act in the public's best interests by publishing the information. A MiningWatch [flier](#) states that there are 2 millions tonnes of mining waste produced every day.

However, there is a problem with the NPRI site - and that is that not all mining operations have releases reported. For example, Imperial Metals has an open pit copper and molybdenum mine called [Huckleberry Mine](#). Searching the [NPRI](#) for Imperial Metals brings up a page that shows that there are no reports made by this company.

Often, however, a search by company name can turn up some revealing information. For example, a search search on [Suncor](#), one company in Alberta's north that is engaged in oil sands development, provided a wealth of data. Suncor's development is an [open pit](#) operation. According to the NPRI, Suncor released 51 kilograms of mercury and 594 kilograms of lead in 2007. Also among the long list of chemicals and heavy metals released are included 59 tonnes of 1,2,4-Trimethylbenzene, 19 tonnes of Benzene, 18 kilograms of Cadmium, 218 tonnes of cyclohexane, 375 tonnes of sulphuric acid and 289 tonnes of xylene. [Benzene](#), according to the government, is a carcinogen - it causes cancer.

Not all of the chemicals and metals listed as emissions for Suncor in 2007 are listed by the government as [environmental contaminants](#). However, that list is being updated all the time as new information about the effects of chemicals and metals becomes available.

The latest Canadian lake under threat is situated in British Columbia. Known as *Teztan Biny* to the First Nations, there is abundant reserves of copper and gold to be recovered in the area. Taseko Mines wants to extract it, but it needs a containment pond for the toxic tailings, so it has proposed turning [Fish Lake](#) into a "mine waste impoundment area." British Columbia's Premier, Gordon Campbell, threw his [support](#) behind the mine project earlier this year.

The Taseko Mines [proposes](#) using Teztan Biny as a containment pond, and in return for the favour, will build an artificial lake. If approved, the project is estimated to be worth at least \$10 billion for Taseko Mines.

Information [sessions](#) were held last week by the federal Secretariat for the Panel, an organization that is charged with reviewing the environmental impact of Prosperity Mine by Environment Canada.

There are at least 8 other lakes that may become waste containment ponds, although one project was apparently shelved in 2007.