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WILLIAMS LAKE TRIBUNE

## Tsilhqot'in chiefs protest Prosperity mine

By Erin Hitchcock - Williams Lake Tribune

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Dozens of protesters held up signs on Highway 97 between McLeese Lake and MacAllister Thursday afternoon to show their opposition to the destruction of Fish Lake should Prosperity mine be built.

Among those protesting were Xeni Gwet'in Chief Marilyn Baptiste, ?Esdilagh Chief Bernie Elkins, T?esqox Chief Francis Lacey, Ulkatcho First Nation Chief Allen Louie, and Lhtako Dene Nation Chief Geronimo Squinas.

They, as well as members from First Nations communities and their supporters, displayed messages such as "Our lakes and our rives are our life, Our elders won't gather at a mine site, Our pristine lakes are the heritage for our children and grandchildren, You know you hit rock bottom when you're a miner," and "Water is more precious than gold."

They were also protesting the B.C. government's recent decision to grant Taseko Mines Ltd. an environmental assessment certificate for the mine following the provincial review process that was completed.

A federal panel is still reviewing the mine project and will hold public hearings beginning March 22 in Williams Lake.

If built, the copper-gold mine would be built about 125 kilometres southwest of Williams Lake at Fish Lake (Tetzan Biny), which First Nations chiefs say is sacred and in the Tsilhqot'in declaration of rights area.

As part of its Fish Compensation Plan, Taseko Mines Ltd. would build a new lake and fill it with fish to replace Fish Lake that would be compromised for the mine.

Lacey, holding a sign that read "Free the Tsilhqot'in you just might free Tibet," said many Tsilhqot'in members and other supporters were demonstrating Thursday because they don't want to see the mine go through.

"The land is very vital to our people and where we make our livelihood," Lacey said. "We want our waters to remain pure for the fish and for our people's survival."

He said the protesters wanted to send a strong message to the government and the mining industry that the Tsilhqot'in Nation is going to stand firm against the mine.

"We have a lot of allies that will be supporting us right across B.C. and right across Canada," he said. "Our people are very concerned about this proposed mine and we can't stand back any longer to let them just push it through and rubber stamp the whole process."

Baptiste — with signs behind her that said "destroying Fish Lake not the answer" and "blue gold" — said the protesters were trying to get the attention of the world.

"We are looking to save our fish, our waters, the headwaters of the Taseko River and Taseko lakes, which are a part of that wild salmon run that is part of the Chilko run," Baptiste said.

She said the protest would get more people to realize they do have a voice and that there are First Nations who are concerned.

She said the protesters gathered were a fraction of the Tsilhqot'in people who are concerned about their aboriginal right to hunt, fish, and gather food and medicines.

She added that the B.C. environmental assessment process is "a rubber stamp" process that has never turned down a mine.

Baptiste said a joint review panel process should have been used, not the B.C. environmental assessment process and the federal panel review process. A joint review process, she said, would have included First Nations, the provincial government, and the federal government.

"Through B.C. Supreme Court and our aboriginal rights and title case, this proposed mine is in our Eastern trap line in the declaration of rights area." Baptiste said. adding that since the Tsilhqot'in Nation

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has never given up its rights or title, the mine should have been reviewed only under a joint review panel.

"Our land is not for sale, has never been for sale, as we have never entered into the treaty process, and we don't intend to," Baptiste said.

Brian Battison, vice president of corporate affairs, said all of the First Nations concerns will be addressed through the federal review process.

"Those questions may be asked and they'll be addressed in the federal process as they were addressed in the provincial process," he says.

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