

BY SCOTT HED

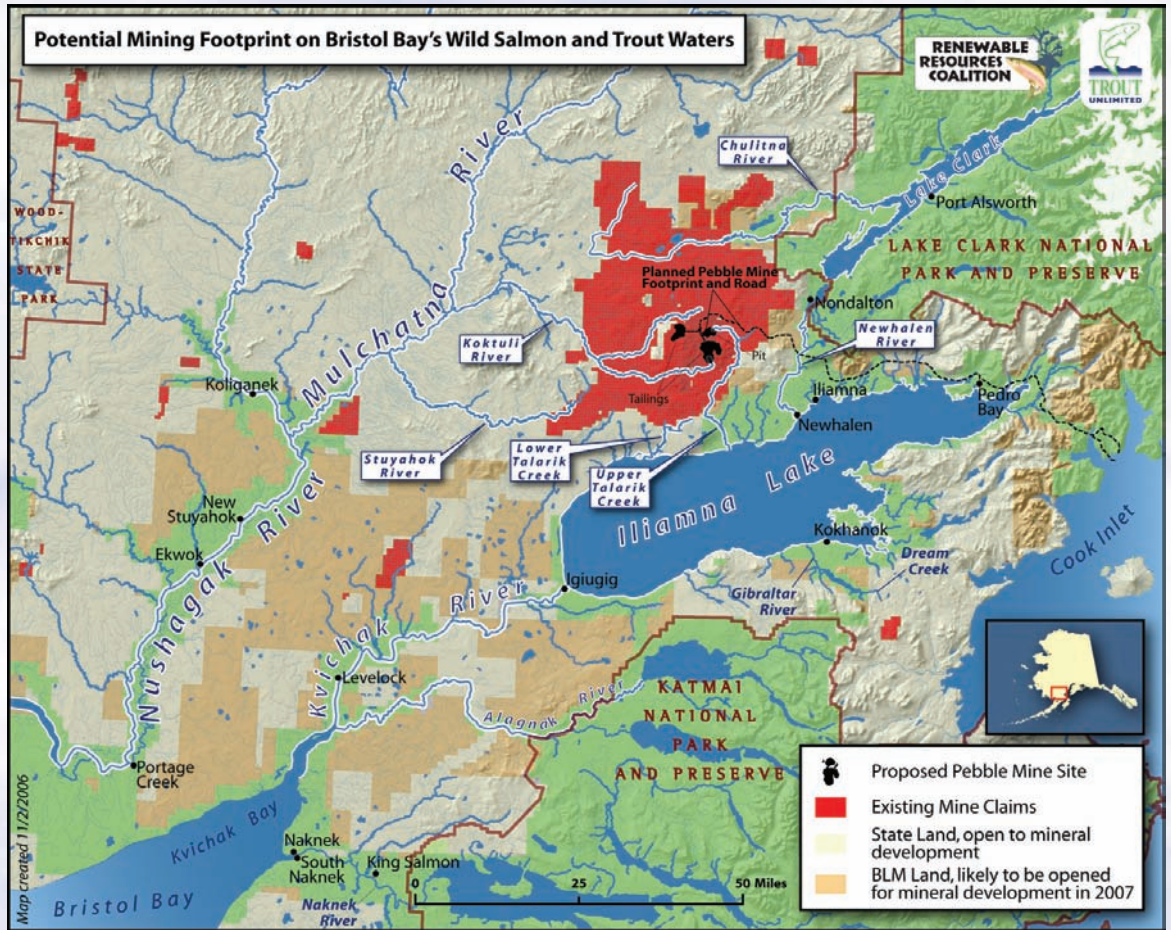


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Pebble Mine Proposal Threatens Bristol Bay

The landscape of southwest Alaska is one of rolling hills, open tundra, and countless creeks and streams that feed into larger rivers. It's a place unreachable by road, leaving those who visit to arrive by plane and then travel by smaller planes or boats to go further afield.

The fine article "A Texas Sized Opportunity" in the Convention 2007 issue of Game Trails details the involvement of Dallas Safari Club, the Dallas Ecological Foundation, and other groups in the support of The Conservation Fund's Southwest Alaska Salmon Habitat Initiative. This project has resulted in the conservation of over 61,000 acres of productive habitat and continued access for hunting and angling opportunities on those lands.

Unfortunately, the future of the Bristol Bay region in southwest Alaska is very much in doubt. The region is threatened by the prospect of large scale mining, the likes of which Alaska and our country may have never seen before. Development of the Pebble Mine and potentially several others on both state and federal lands puts at risk the world's largest runs of wild salmon (with tens of millions of fish harvested every year), trophy rainbow trout, Dolly Varden char, grayling, and all the other wildlife that support a thriving commercial fishery, sport fishing economy, and subsistence way of life for

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Editor's Note: The Pebble Mine proposal is a controversial issue pitting the potential for enormous mineral development against the protection of one of America's most rich and diverse fish, wildlife and recreational ecosystems. America needs mineral resources to sustain our economy and standard of living. We also need wild places, wildlife and wild fish to sustain our quality of life. In Southwest Alaska, hard rock mining of a staggering scale is proposed in one of the world's greatest fish and wildlife regions and fabled hunting and fishing destinations. As hunter and angler conservationists we must each decide what we deem more valuable as huge tradeoffs are at stake.

DSC and DEF have contributed tens of thousands of dollars to support wildlife and habitat conservation and secure hunting and fishing access in SW Alaska – not just for the fisheries, but also for the bear, moose, caribou, wolf and other wildlife that depend on the rivers and salmon, the ecosystem's foundation, for their survival. The Pebble Mine proposal may jeopardize the very habitat we have fought to conserve. Yes, we need minerals – but at what cost?

Scott Hed is the Outreach Director for the Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska. His in depth article touches on the scope of this issue. Advocates for the Pebble Mine have their own opinion and responses to the statements made herein. I encourage DSC members to educate themselves on this issue and make your own determination on the merits and dangers of mining in Bristol Bay.

– Gray N. Thornton

*You can learn more by visiting,
www.tu.org/bristolbay,
www.sportsmansalliance4ak.org and
www.renewableresourcescoalition.org*

*For Northern Dynasty's position, visit
www.ndmpebblemine.org and
www.truthaboutpebble.org*

Moose skull on a tundra hill, looking toward the Kvichak River. Credit: Erin McKittrick



Looking over the headwaters of Upper Talarik Creek from Groundhog Mountain, with the mine site, Frying Pan Lake, and Sharp Mountain in background. Credit: Erin McKittrick

the local inhabitants of the region. Approximately 1,000 square miles of state-owned land in southwest Alaska have been staked with mining claims in recent years. Due to the remoteness of the region and the

lack of infrastructure, there has not yet been a major mine developed. But that could potentially change if Alaska's decision makers approve the Pebble Mine project. Pebble is a planned copper-gold-molybdenum

mine that would be located northwest of Lake Iliamna, America's "other Great Lake" – it's the size of Lake Erie.

The scale of the proposed development is staggering. The company's Canadian developer, Northern Dynasty Mines, is calling it potentially one of the largest mines in the world. Preliminary plans show the project may include a massive open pit, as much as 2 miles long, 1.5 miles wide, and 1,700 feet deep to extract a mineral deposit relatively close to the surface. Another area of the project could involve an underground block caving process mine to access deeper mineralization. To hold back the toxic byproducts of the mining process, a tailings pond covering as much as 10 square miles and hundreds of feet deep would be held behind a series of earthen dams, the largest of which would rank among the biggest dams on earth – 4 miles long and over 700 feet tall – in a very seismically active area. To fill the need for water (three times as much as is used daily by Anchorage, pop. 270,000), Northern Dynasty has applied for the water rights to Upper Talarik Creek and the north

Sockeye photo courtesy of Barry and Cathy Beck.



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Sockeye photo courtesy of Barry and Cathy Beck.

and south forks of the Kuktuli River. Upper Talarik Creek is home to trophy rainbow trout and sockeye and silver salmon that migrate up the Kvichak River and through Lake Iliamna. The Kvichak sockeye run is historically the largest in the world, numbering in the millions of fish annually. King salmon that spawn in the waters of the Kuktulis are part of Alaska's largest runs of kings in the Nushagak/Mulchatna system.

According to current mine plans, a port would be developed on the west side of Cook Inlet and a road would run over 100 miles on the north side of Lake Iliamna to connect the port with the Pebble site. Power would need to come from somewhere, including possibly imported from the Kenai Peninsula on the east side of Cook Inlet. An estimated 2,000 workers would be required to construct the mine, and 1,000 jobs would be needed to operate it over its lifetime. If Pebble received the permits needed to proceed, the likelihood of additional development on state lands and over 1 million acres of Bureau of Land Management lands in the region would increase dramatically – and the dominoes could fall in a very damaging way.

So, besides the obvious threat to fish, what is truly at risk?

In short, an ecosystem that supports over 5,500 jobs that depend upon healthy lands and fish and game populations and contributes over \$330 million annually to Alaska's economy, as well as providing food on the table for thousands of residents in dozens of villages across the region. In 2005, over 4,200 people were employed in commercial fishing and fish

processing. Nearly 1,000 more were employed in sport fishing and hunting operations that host anglers and hunters from across the globe.

The primary hunting opportunities in the region involve caribou, moose, and brown bear. The Mulchatna caribou herd depends on land and the drainages of Bristol Bay. This herd, which is managed to sustain a population of 100,000 to 150,000 animals and to allow for maximum opportunity for hunting, was last estimated in 2004 at a

population of 85,000 animals – down from 200,000 in 1996. Herd size is cyclical, and is affected by many factors including hunting, predation by bears and wolves, disease (an outbreak of foot rot in 1998 is a contributing factor to the recent decline), and reproductive rates. Mulchatna caribou have a reputation for large body and antler size and the herd is hunted by local residents, non-local Alaskans and non-residents. In recent years,



Salmon strips drying in the village of New Stuyahok. Credit: Erin McKittrick

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Sockeye photo courtesy of Barry and Cathy Beck.

roughly 50% of hunters targeting Mulchatna caribou are non-residents.

Any degradation of water quality in this region would impact these game species. Bears in this region grow to large sizes and an important component of their diet is fish. Obviously, if the salmon runs were dramatically reduced, bears and the opportunity to hunt them would suffer.

This region offers some of the last remaining opportunities for a truly remote hunt in a wilderness setting. Once the plane drops a hunting party off and departs, a sense of solitude can be found here that has all but disappeared in many parts of our country and the world. To a degree, the exploratory operations of Northern Dynasty, including heavy helicopter traffic and exploration blasting, are already impacting this somewhat intangible value. Some guide operators have either scaled back or abandoned their operations in the area entirely, due in large part to the disturbance caused by mining company helicopters.

Some of the major concerns presented by the Pebble project that apply to hunting revolve around the access road and the influx of workers to the region. The region supports a relatively low-density moose population, but does offer hunting opportunity for both resident and non-resident hunters alike, with 60"+ trophies taken every season. However, Alaska's hunting is conducted with consideration to federal and state subsistence priority laws which dictate the distribution of opportunities between local Alaska residents, non-local Alaska residents, and non-resident hunters.

Hunting in Bristol Bay's Game Management Unit 17 was closed in 2005 for non-resident moose and caribou within a 2 mile corridor on either side of all the major river drainages except for 75 special permits. The partial closure in 2005 resulted when local villages complained of too many non-resident hunters. The proposed Pebble Mine would bring in 2,000 people to construct the mine infrastructure, including a new road from Cook Inlet to the mine site. It would also employ 1,000 miners at the headwaters of the Koktuli and Stuyahok Rivers which is a traditional calving ground for the Mulchatna caribou herd and a prime moose and grizzly hunting area. Wildlife officials have indicated that if there is any increased hunting pressure in the area caused by the mine, Unit 17 and parts of Unit 9 will become closed to non-resident and even resident hunters for moose and caribou excepting only those few locals with a Tier II subsistence permit. Clearly, if the mine and the

access road were approved with the resultant spike in construction and mining employment, state and federal subsistence laws would mandate that non-resident hunters and possibly even resident Alaskans will no longer be able to hunt caribou and moose in the Bristol Bay area. Non-resident hunters are always the first group to lose opportunities.

Here's what others have been saying about Bristol Bay and the threats facing the region:

- "The prospect of hard rock mining in the Bristol Bay area of Alaska scares the hell out of the world angling community and the businesses that serve it. These are some of the most cherished fishing waters on earth. Prized not just for their fisheries, but recognized for their broad wilderness character here in America and across the world, Bristol Bay's public lands must continue to be protected from the devastation that would result from hard rock mine prospecting and development." *Robert Ramsay, president of the American Fly Fishing Trade Association (AFFTA)*

- "The proposed Pebble Mine and other potential mining activity on state and federal lands in Bristol Bay poses a grave threat to pure water, Wild Alaska Salmon and the tens of thousands of jobs they sustain." *David Harsila, president of the Alaska Independent Fishermen's Marketing Association*

- "Now therefore be it resolved by the Bristol Bay Native Association Board of Directors that BBNA opposes all large-scale mining within the Bristol Bay Region until studies for a project unequivocally prove

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that there will be NO NET LOSS to subsistence, commercial, recreational and sports uses of our resources within our region or to the region's land, air, and water quality." signed: *Fred T. Angasan, president of the Bristol Bay Native Association Board of Directors*

• "If this was some essential commodity that we absolutely had to have to run our economy it would be a different matter, and even then I would want to have a lot better attention being paid to the environmental process. But this one, I just don't like it." *U.S. Senator Ted Stevens (R-AK)*

• "I had said I could think of no place in Alaska where I'd less rather see the largest open-pit mine in the world than at the headwaters of the Kaktuli and Talarik Creek, two world-class fishing streams and wild salmon spawning areas. ... There is a location where I'd even less wish to see such a mine: right in the middle of our living room floor at Lake Clark." *Former Alaska Governor, the late Jay Hammond*

This is a stark example of long-term versus short-term thinking. Will



Frying Pan Lake, which would be lost underneath the proposed tailings pond for Pebble Mine. Credit: Erin McKittrick

we elect to allow this part of the world to continue to function as it has for thousands of years, supporting incredible hunting and fishing opportunities, a way of life and a vibrant economy? Or will we risk this remarkable renewable resource to roll the dice on a massive mining project fraught with potential disaster and with a finite lifespan? As of this writing, the Alaska legislature

was debating bills that would provide stronger conservation measures for the watersheds and lands of the Bristol Bay region. Hopefully, Alaska's politicians will listen to the unprecedented, powerful and growing alliance of commercial fishing, sport fishing, hunting, and native subsistence interests as they decide the future of Bristol Bay. *GT*



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