

# Salmon and Trout as Mine Waste?

A recap on the proposed Pebble Mine in Alaska. By Ted Williams

Let's say you seek to develop an industrial complex that includes: the continent's largest open-pit mine; a mile-deep underground mine; a 15-square-mile reservoir supposedly to contain liquid toxic waste in perpetuity; and a morass of powerlines, pipelines and roads. What would be the very worst site you could select? Well, if you value fish and wildlife, you'd have to go with Alaska's Bristol Bay area, specifically the watersheds of Lake Iliamna and the Kvichak and Nushagak rivers, habitat for an enormous array of wildlife including the planet's largest populations of salmonids.

Any possible hesitation would be dispelled by these facts: The witch's brew of sulfuric acid and heavy metals—contained by five earthen dams (two of which would be the world's highest)—would be centered in the "Ring of Fire," a volatile seismic zone beset by major earthquakes. And dust clouds from daily operations would festoon downwind land and water with such poisons as arsenic, mercury, lead, copper and molybdenum. But most people don't value fish and wildlife, and that's why Alaska's state government is pushing this very kind of industrial complex at this very site. Since I reported on the proposed Pebble Mine in this magazine in November/December 2006, here's what's been happening:

■ July 31, 2007: The developer—a small Canadian firm with shallow pockets called Northern Dynasty—partners with the second largest multinational mining corporation, London-based Anglo American, to form the "Pebble Limited Partnership."

■ August 26, 2008: Alaskans nearly succeed in voting to stem toxic discharge from metal mines like Pebble. Polls indicate victory, but at the 11th hour Governor Sarah Palin derails the ballot initiative with an unprecedented and arguably illegal statement of opposition.

■ November 14, 2008: Bush's lame-duck BLM recommends that 1.1 million acres of prime fish and wildlife habitat adjacent to the project area long closed to development be opened for mining.

■ May 5, 2009: Six Alaska Native tribes file suit against the state DNR (ongoing at this writing), charging the agency unlawfully accommodated Pebble by turning its Bristol Bay Area Plan inside out, re-designating 12 million acres from fish and wildlife habitat to hard-rock mining. Trout Unlimited and the Alaska Independent Fishermen's Marketing Association join with plaintiffs.

■ July 29, 2009: Eight Bristol Bay native corporations challenge permits because the public was denied participation guaranteed by the state constitution. The suit is ongoing, but research by plaintiffs' attorneys reveals dumping of toxic drilling slurry on tundra and 45 Pebble Limited water-withdrawal violations for test borings. "Pebble had just dipped its toe into the process and was already in violation," comments Trout Unlimited's Tim Bristol. "So Pebble and DNR cut a deal in which the company paid a \$45,000 fine and lost its permits during the time it didn't need them."

■ Summer 2009: TU helps sponsor fieldwork in which biologists

discover 92 miles of previously unknown anadromous fish habitat in and around the project area.

■ February 1, 2010: Pebble Limited announces that new test borings indicate richer ore than previously estimated—12 percent richer for copper, 14 percent for gold and 16 percent for molybdenum.

■ April 14, 2010: Jewelry giant Zale Corporation joins 31 other major jewelers in a pledge to boycott Pebble gold.

■ April 20, 2010: Rep. Jim Moran (D-VA), chairman of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee, and former chairman Rep. Norm Dicks (D-WA), add their voices to 300 sporting groups and businesses in urging BLM not to open the 1.1 million acres to mining, as per the Bush administration's attempted giveaway. "If

[Interior Secretary] Salazar keeps this BLM land off limits, it would almost box Pebble in," declares Sportsman's Alliance for Alaska director, Scott Hed. The project area is bordered on north and east by Lake Clark National Park and Preserve and on the south by Lake Iliamna and Katmai National Park.

■ April 23, 2010: DNR reissues Pebble's permits that it had revoked as an alleged punishment for violations.



Everything considered, fish-and-wildlife advocates now have reason to be cautiously optimistic—especially because of Anglo's repeated pledge not to develop any mine "where communities are against us." That pledge took on enormous significance last December when the Bristol Bay Native Corporation—representing virtually the entire population of the area—abandoned years of neutrality and officially opposed the mine.

And apparently President Obama understands Bristol Bay's global significance because, when he opened vast offshore areas to oil and gas exploration last March, he kept it closed.

While the project site is on state land, TU's Tim Bristol says this: "The buck really stops with the Obama administration." That's because the Army Corps of Engineers and the EPA have to issue permits for all the wetlands work.

And Scott Hed adds: "Maybe these agencies will look at this and say, like most rational people, 'Gee building a massive containment pond behind five huge dams in an area that gets frequent earthquakes might not be such a great idea.'" ●

Ted Williams writes **FR&R's** Conservation column.