

## **B.C. leads the nation in contaminated sites**

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Ethan Baron, Canwest News Service, Times Colonist  
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VANCOUVER - B.C. has the largest number of contaminated sites on federal land of any province in Canada, figures just released by the Treasury Board reveal.

B.C. has 4,088 contaminated sites on federal land, while the next-closest province, Ontario, has 3,799. Quebec came third with 1,915.

And the provincial government has identified almost 8,000 more contaminated sites, on B.C. Crown and private land.

On B.C. Crown land, cleanup has been started or finished on 48 sites.

B.C. taxpayers are increasingly at risk of paying for cleanup on remaining contaminated zones, said Randy Christensen, a lawyer for Ecojustice, formerly called Sierra Legal. "Just letting these sites sit unattended and uncared for makes it more likely that the taxpayers are going to pick up the tab for them," Christensen said.

While B.C. has prioritized sites on Crown land in response to a damning 2002 auditor general's report, thousands of contamination zones on private land remain unprioritized. At the federal level, each of 21 departments is responsible for contamination on its own land, resulting in fragmentation of responsibility. "There's not a central body that manages countrywide," said Frank Dugal, administrator of the Treasury Board's contaminated-sites inventory.

On B.C. Crown lands, the Ministry of Lands has taken the lead-agency role, prioritizing sites annually. Since 2001, B.C. has earmarked \$193 million and spent \$97 million for cleanup on Crown sites, believed to number 2,000 to 3,000, said Brian Clarke, director of the ministry's restoration branch.

Of the \$193 million, \$183 million is for just two sites, the Britannia mine and the contaminated Expo '86 site.

Most contaminated areas pose no significant threat to health or the environment, Clarke said. "We've made a conscious decision to not go out and spend a lot of time and money trying to identify every one of them," Clarke said. "The majority of them are low-risk."

Mining is a valuable component of B.C.'s economy, but cultural and natural resources can be easily destroyed in the stampede to exploit mineral riches, said Andy Miller, a scientist for the Vancouver-based Wilderness Committee.

Two proposals under consideration threaten devastation, Miller said.

In northern B.C., the Shell oil company plans a massive, 1,600-mine coal bed methane

extraction project in the headwaters of three rivers critical to salmon, the Skeena, Nass and Stikine.

"You're talking about a reasonably high probability of eliminating the three biggest salmon fishery rivers in the world," Miller said. "Not to say it shouldn't go ahead, but let's put the brakes on . . . to see if there's any way this thing can be contained."

Shell said in a statement that no water from coal seams would be discharged into streams.

In Clayoquot Sound, the government is allowing exploration by a company proposing a copper mine, in spite of a serious contamination at a defunct copper mine 50 kilometres away on Mt. Washington, Miller said.

"The science of dealing with toxicity and contamination needs so much work. We're in the Stone Age," Miller said. "We need to see massive government and corporate support of scientific development."

### **High-risk contaminated sites in B.C.:**

. Britannia mine, Howe Sound - A massive defunct copper mine produces acidic water contaminated with heavy metals. The former owner contributed \$30 million to an estimated \$99-million cleanup. The Britannia mine-water treatment plant began full operation in January 2006.

. Pacific Place, Vancouver - More than a century of industrial use on 82 hectares on the north shore of False Creek included coal-gasification plants, sawmills, and wood-preserving operations. Cleanup, estimated to cost \$84 million, is 80 per cent done.

. Bralorne-Takla mine, Omineca region of northern B.C. - Mercury mining in 1943 and 1944 produced serious contamination by substances including arsenic, cadmium and mercury.

. Two Mile Creek, Hazelton - Mine tailings threaten local drinking and irrigation supplies, as they lie in Hazelton's watershed. Contaminants include lead, arsenic, copper, and tin.

. Yankee Girl mine, south of Nelson - Heavy metals from mine tailings contaminate a two-hectare area. An engineered cover to stop erosion and protect groundwater is expected to be finished this year.

. Port Alice, Vancouver Island - Pulp and paper mill shut in 2004, leaving environmental damage. A deal with the mill's new owners put them on the hook for any future damage. The province agreed to pay for cleaning up historic contamination, which has required harbour dredging and the investigation of two unlicensed landfills.

. Cork Province mine, west of Kaslo - Mass of mine tailings left beside a creek from a zinc, cadmium, gold and silver mine that ran between 1900 and 1966. Contaminants include lead, arsenic, and zinc. Moving the tailings away from the creek and containing them is expected to be done this year.