

Williams Lake Tribune

## First Nations unite over mining

By Erin Hitchcock - Williams Lake Tribune

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### **Prosperity mine's potential benefits 'nothing to us': TNG director of government services**

Several First Nations groups met last week to unite on one issue — mining.

The meeting, hosted by the Williams Lake Indian Band on Friday, July 18, included chiefs, councillors, technical staff and band members of 11 bands from the Chilcotin, Shuswap and Carrier Nations from Williams Lake to Kamloops.

The biggest issue discussed, says Joe Alphonse, director of government services for the Tsilhqot'in Nation Government, was the proposed Prosperity mine project, a project he says is touted as being a benefit to Williams Lake.

“That means absolutely nothing to us. The benefit to Tsilhqot'in First Nation people, that's what we want to hear. If you're not coming from that perspective, then we have an issue.”

When built, Prosperity is to create 500 full-time jobs, 1,280 indirect jobs, and would spend \$200 million every year for the 22-year life of the mine. If approval is given and the company decides to go ahead, construction of the mine will take two years.

“We don't have an economy in the Tsilhqot'in, so what benefit is that to us?” asks Alphonse.

He says Fish Lake is a resource for First Nations, one which the Tsilhqot'in people have told Taseko Mines Ltd. can't be destroyed.

“We would not entertain the destruction of Fish Lake under any circumstances, regardless of any number of jobs. If their plans still call on the destruction of Fish Lake, then there is no deal, as far as we're concerned.”

He says that even if there was a joint panel review process, TNG's position wouldn't change.

"The current EA process puts us in a situation where we are just an interest group. That's it. We're not an interest group."

He says if there is going to be any spillage from the mine, it will go directly into Taseko Lake, which is near the Chilcotin River. Therefore, he is concerned about the possible threat the mine would have on the salmon stocks.

"Sometimes that's all we have to live on. Potentially speaking, I believe it could have a devastating effect on our salmon stock, and the total and complete destruction of Fish Lake."

He says the Prosperity project is creating a sense of false hope and he doesn't believe the mine is as viable as Taseko claims it to be.

"What they've done is created hope in a logging industry that is going down, and we don't feel that's right," he says. "Let's look at the industry that has brought us here, kept us here, and let's fix that industry and call for the provincial government to produce more financial resources and stick it back in the industry here."

The First Nations groups at the meeting showed that there is strength in unity, he adds.

"I think First Nations groups are aware that whether you're part of a treaty process or not, we have to work together and this is something that's definitely forcing us to do that and there's going to be more meetings and more nations joining us in that process."

Xeni Gwet'in First Nation Government Chief Marilyn Baptiste was one of the chiefs at the meeting last week.

"I think basically our message is simply that we do need to be united with regards to issues such as this because we are all dealing with such impacts and impacts to our territory.

"Basically we need to be able to deal with these things and be able to protect our territories for seven generations or more because that is our jobs, as well as the economic, sustainable economic future."

She has concerns about the rocks Taseko plans to place in Fish Lake, and is also worried about draining the lake and transferring the fish somewhere else. She says there are also concerns about the health of local wildlife.

"The thing is it's messing with Mother Nature, and we have learned that's not something you're supposed to do, but some people just don't get it."

Even if Fish Lake wasn't touched, there would still be both environmental and social impacts caused from the mine.

“With all the social stuff that we are currently going through with the impacts of the residential school, some of our people who may be able to work there may not be there for the long haul,” she says. “We, the Xenigwet’in-Tsilhqot’in Nation have never given up our titles and rights.”

Brian Battison, vice president of corporate affairs for Taseko Mines Ltd, won’t comment on the details of the project, as it will be in the environmental assessment review.

“In that will be our entire plan for how we propose to use this piece of property,” he says. “Then, the government regulators and the general public will have an opportunity to examine our plans. The process is rigorous and thorough.”

Included in that review will be details of the geology of the rock and what will be done to Fish Lake, and will also include data collection and geological and water modeling, for example.

He notes that the fish in Fish Lake are believed to be small and may do better in another lake.

“The fish are small. It’s overpopulated, so they are not as healthy as they could be,” he says.

He says Taseko Mines spent \$90 million on experienced consultants, engineering firms, and environmental management firms to carry out studies and data collection.

“Engineers, when they put their stamp on something, they’re bound by law to stake their professional reputations on the work that they do.”

Before Taseko submits its work, the government needs to sign off on a terms of reference. The environmental assessment, he adds, would also include social benefit and impact and economic benefit and impact, in addition to environmental impact.

“We’re very conscious of the need to maximize local benefit,” Battison adds. “If local people are successful, we’ll be successful.”

The next step, Battison says, will be working groups in September that will include federal and provincial government agencies, as well as First Nations.

There will be a series of public meetings in the fall and winter so the public will be able examine the details of the project.

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