

# Windy Craggy mine worries must be addressed

**O**PPONENTS of the proposed Windy Craggy copper mine are worried about a number of things.

The salmon in the area's rivers, sheep, bald eagles and the tourism industry — all are at risk, they say, if the mine goes ahead. Despite the economic benefits of the mine, which I outlined in Saturday's column, environmentalists are determined to prevent Geddes Resources from proceeding with the \$400-million project.

Located in the northwestern corner of B.C., close to the Alaskan panhandle and the Yukon, the Windy Craggy project has drawn flak from American and Canadian government departments unimpressed by the company's first-stage study.

The provincial mine development steering committee has asked Geddes to redo the mine plan.

The major concern, as the company says in its booklet describing the project, "is the possibility of acid drainage." Windy Craggy's rock bears sulphur, and when it is exposed to water and oxygen the result is sulphuric acid, which dissolves metals in the rock.

The acid and dissolved metals from millions of tonnes of waste rock can poison waterways, making them unfit for fish for centuries or even thousands of years.

That longevity gives one pause. Raw sewage in the waters around Vancouver and Victoria is a more immediate problem than this remote mine, but doesn't attract demonstrators the way Windy Craggy has. However, with a decent sewage system clean water would be months, not generations, away.

At risk from Windy Craggy are the salmon of the Alsek River drainage system. Part of that sys-



tem is the Tatshenshini River, which would receive the brunt of acid drainage from the mine. The rivers support a small commercial fishery out of Alaska and a Yukon Indian food and sports fishery.

The solutions appear to be simple. Lime, which many gardeners sprinkle on their lawns in the spring, will neutralize the acid. Alternatively, covering the rock

with water prevents oxygen from reaching the iron sulphides so no acid can form.

Acid generation is a familiar problem to today's mining industry. Several operating mines — Westmin on the Island, Equity Silver at Houston and Cominco's Sullivan Mine at Kimberley — use lime to neutralize the acid.

Geddes initially planned to blend lime or other neutralizing material with the waste rock and store it in dumps on a couple of the glaciers that plaster the area.

But that didn't pass muster with the steering committee. The blending process is unproven, and nobody is sure how the glaciers will react to being dumping grounds.

For the more problematic mine tailings, Geddes planned to dump them in a pond behind a 100-metre-high dam. It's an earth-

quake-prone area, but engineers know a lot about designing dams. In Mexico an earth-filled dam, as this one will be, has withstood six quakes since it was completed in 1962, including one of 8.1 on the Richter scale whose epicentre was 50 kilometres distant.

Geddes needs to take another crack at its design to satisfy steering committee chairman Norm Ringstad.

Clearly, there is a risk to the fishery, and it's the job of Ringstad's committee to get that risk down to near-zero. Despite the wages and tax revenues projected for this mine, wiping out a renewable resource is an unacceptable trade-off.

The company must also be pinned down for the future before any approvals are given. The government must lock in money from Geddes to fund the care of any waste dumps and tailing ponds in perpetuity.

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