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U.S. officials vow to fight B.C. mining plans

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BY GRADY SEMMENS

CALGARY — Plans for a new coal mine near Montana's Glacier National Park are sparking an international environmental dispute over fears polluted water from Canada will flow into the park.

The mine and the B.C. government's plan to allow coalbed methane development near Fernie are worrying Americans who say the projects could damage one of their country's most-prized wilderness areas.

"These projects are of the scope that they could have a significant impact on the surrounding area, which for us is probably the most pristine area left in the lower 48 states," said Paul Williams, president of the Flathead Lakers, a group dedicated to protecting the Flathead Lake near Kalispell, Mont. "We're very concerned the regulatory processes in place in Canada for reviewing this type of development aren't as strong as in the United States."

B.C.'s mining ministry says such concerns are unfounded and that Montana's input is being considered in its review of the mine plan, but that hasn't stopped government leaders south of the border from trying to put the brakes on both proposals.

"If they want to pursue a full-scale operation that could devastate one of our most pristine and valuable areas for recreation and wildlife, then they're asking for a fight," said Montana Senator Max Baucus, who has asked U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to review international water laws in hopes of quashing an Ontario company's plan to start an open-pit coal mine along Cabin Creek, just west of the Flathead River in southeastern B.C.

Baucus said Cline Mining Corp.'s plan to unearth two million tonnes of coal per year should also be stopped by the International Joint Commission on water.

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