



Toxic Alaska Mine Could “Destroy the World’s Last Great Sockeye Salmon Fishery”

By [Joaqin Estus](#), [Indian Country Today](#) Published September 1, 2019



President Trump and Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy, pictured on Air Force One. The massive Pebble Mine project is back in play after Dunleavy met with Trump. Courtesy of Gov. Dunleavy / Official White House Photo by Sheila Craighead

Alaska Gov. Mike Dunleavy had nothing but encouragement for a potential investor in a controversial mine.

“[Alaska’s open for business](#),” Dunleavy told Wheaton Precious Metals, Ltd. of Canada, in a July 30, 2019 letter. He said, “A fair, efficient, and thorough permitting process, free of interference and threats from project opponents, is essential to Alaska’s future economic growth.” The letter surfaced after a public records request by Alaska Public Media.

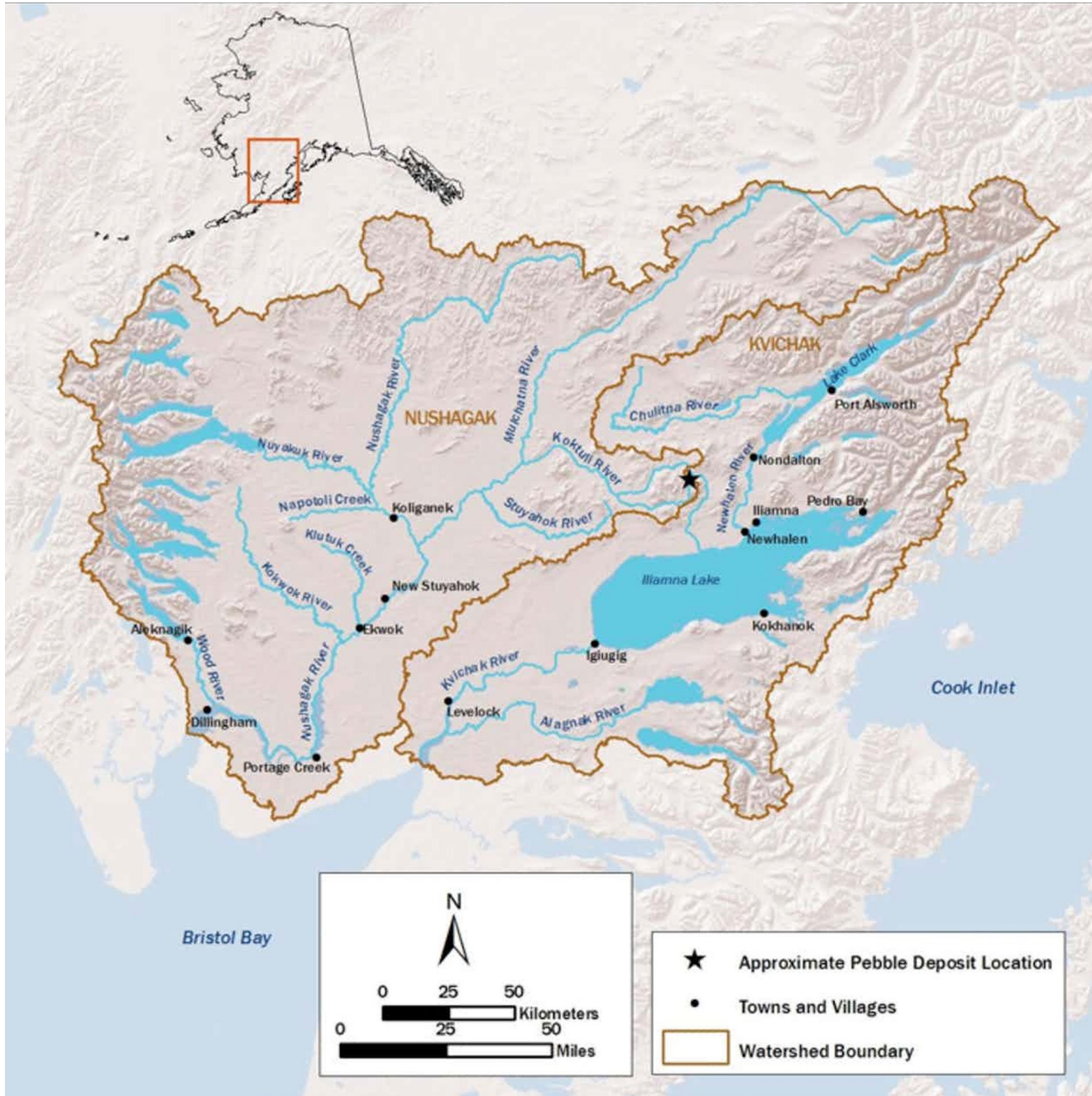
A coalition of tribes and environmental and fishing organizations had warned the company about trouble ahead. Dunleavy called their statements “threatening,” and said the state “will stand by those who invest in Alaska and will actively help defend them from frivolous and scurrilous attacks.”

Estimates put the Pebble ore deposit at the second largest in the world, with hundreds of billions of dollars worth of minerals. Getting copper, gold and molybdenum out of that pay dirt, however, would generate billions of tons of waste that would be stored in earthen dams. That waste



would have to be stored forever near the headwaters of the world's largest sockeye

salmon fishery, both a cultural and multi-billion dollar resource.



[The coalition's 9-page letter](#) said the proposed Pebble mine poses significant hurdles for any investor.

“First and foremost is the unrelenting and overwhelming consensus of opposition, which,

rather than diminishing is intensifying,” said the coalition.

Kendra Kloster, Tlingit, of Native Peoples Action said the passion for protecting the region will never go away. “You have this entire region



that has come together to say they were going to fight against this mine because this is deep in our hearts. This is protecting our homeland. It's more than just looking at our profits. It's just more than looking at fish. This is our way of life. This is what it's like in Alaska and we're trying to protect our region. And so, yeah, this issue is definitely in the hearts of the people up here in Alaska."

The Bristol Bay Economic Development Corporation, which is funded by fisheries revenues, opposes the Pebble Mine. Bristol Bay President Norm Van Vactor said, "We're not prepared to trade basically our renewable resource for one-time resource extraction that in all likelihood, it's not a question of if there will be a problem, it's actually a question of when that problem will occur."



*"Commercial fishing boats stand ready."
Courtesy of the EPA*

Van Vactor said the proposed mine has seemingly been killed a couple of times. Over the years, several investors have backed out. The EPA suspended the permitting process in 2014.

Van Vactor said it's hard to see the project come back to life. And, "It's so, so frustrating," that hundreds of scientists, biologists, and geologists have worked for years to methodically research and come up with a fact-based statistical analysis. "But in the new politics that we're in today, literally with the stroke of a pen, an administrative order, Twitter, or the threat of

getting fired from your job ... all of that can get undone in a night."

July 30 the EPA withdrew "outdated" determination that put mine on hold.

Dunleavy's letter of support for the proposed mine came after he apparently successfully lobbied President Donald Trump to tell the EPA to lift the 2014 suspension of the permitting process for the mine. During a fueling stop June 26 in Anchorage on his way to Asia, President Trump met with Gov. Dunleavy aboard Air Force One. A month later, EPA announced it was [withdrawing a Proposed Determination](#) issued under the Clean Water Act that had suspended the permitting process.

"Finally, this administration has reversed the outrageous federal government overreach inflicted on the state of Alaska by the Obama administration," [said Pebble Partnership CEO Tom Collier in a prepared statement](#). "The preemptive veto was an action by an administration that sought to vastly expand EPA's authority to regulate land use on state, private and Native-owned lands throughout the United States, and in doing so kill one of America's most important mineral projects before a development plan was proposed or a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement permitting review was undertaken."

Director of United Tribes of Bristol Bay Alannah Hurley, Yup'ik, said in a prepared statement, "The EPA's arbitrary withdrawal of these [protections for Bristol Bay](#) that our tribes fought so long and hard for is just another example of the Trump administration working hand in hand with Pebble's lobbyists and paving the way for this toxic project to destroy the world's last great sockeye salmon fishery for the profit of a foreign mining company."

"This façade of a process by corrupt, politicized agencies has gone on long enough and it's time



for elected leaders to stand up for our people and stop this project from moving forward,” said Hurley. “This comes as we are wrapping up the second-largest recorded salmon harvest in Bristol Bay of 42 million salmon and counting to feed not only our people but the world. Our people will continue to do whatever it takes to stop this mine.”

Van Vactor said the stakes are so high, it chafes to see the project come back to life. Still, he said,

“I gotta believe that common sense and science ultimately will prevail. I think we’re going to get whip sawed a lot more in this process. I am hopeful that what we’re dealing with is an aberration. I thought it was limited to Washington, D.C. but now we have a governor who seems intent on burning the house down. But I am hopeful this is short-term. At the end of the day, there’s an awful lot of good people in Juneau that ultimately I think will do the right thing.”