

A proposed mine in Alaska may bring jobs, but threaten a way of life

By McClatchy Washington Bureau, edited by Newsela on 09.06.13

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Nova Chaney takes a sip of water from the Nushagak River while her brother Dillon, left, and mother Robyn, right, listen to testimony concerning the proposed Pebble Mine during a meeting with EPA administrator Gina McCarthy in the Dillingham Middle School gym on Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2013. Bill Roth/Anchorage Daily News/MCT

DILLINGHAM, Alaska — President Barack Obama’s top environmental official was visibly moved as people in this fishing town told her the giant Pebble Mine would kill wild salmon and destroy their culture.

Gina McCarthy became administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) last month. She said the residents’ words reminded her of what the EPA works for every day.

“I intend to make you proud in the position the president has given me,” she said to a standing ovation. Her speech took place in a packed gymnasium at a Dillingham school.

McCarthy visited the Bristol Bay region this week as a nationwide debate grows over the proposed mine. It could be the largest open-pit mine in North America, and it’s in a region that produces half the world’s wild red salmon.

Creation Or Destruction?

The proposed gold and copper mine pits supporters of job creation against opponents who say the mine will destroy streams, wetlands and salmon populations. Mine opponents in the fishing town of Dillingham were encouraged by what they saw as McCarthy's sympathetic views.

"It was like a shot to the heart when she said, 'I'm going to make you proud,'" said Robyn Chaney of Dillingham. "It gives you a glimmer of hope."

The EPA may use the Clean Water Act to block the Pebble Mine even before it applies for work permits.

Chaney's 14-year-old son, Triston, told the EPA leader that streams in the region are clean enough to drink from.

"The first thing I ever drank as a baby was from a stream, and I want future generations to be able to," he said. "Please use your authority to stop the Pebble Mine."

The area of the mine is a massive green expanse bursting with lakes and streams, a sweeping land of moose, caribou and grizzly bears surrounded by mountains.

A tiny camp, a dot in the Alaskan wilderness, is the only evidence of what could become one of the world's biggest mining operations.

Huge Deposit Of Gold And Copper

The Pebble Partnership says the region's deposit is one of the largest of its kind on the planet. The mine could potentially produce 80.6 billion pounds of copper and 107.4 million ounces of gold over three decades.

The mine site is near the village of Iliamna, a cluster of about 100 people around a huge lake. The community is quiet even in the summer. There's little activity, aside from Pebble Partnership testing core samples and studying the sensitive area it hopes represents a massive financial windfall.

The Pebble workers came to meet McCarthy in Iliamna wearing their safety vests emblazoned with the slogan "zero harm." They said the mine developers are hiring people from Iliamna and the surrounding Alaska Native villages. Their work would range from helping out in the kitchen to guarding workers from bears.

"There are no other job opportunities, absolutely none," said Janessa Woods, who has two children. "If Pebble weren't here, I'd probably be on welfare, probably be on food stamps, probably be on energy assistance."

Added Mary Jane Nielsen, president and CEO of the Alaska Peninsula Corp., “We just need to be able to have some sort of economy in the villages because we have all these young men falling through the cracks.”

Several people in Iliamna urged the EPA not to shut down the mine before the developers submit their plans. They said environmental politics shouldn’t weigh more heavily than the science.

But even in Iliamna, people are sharply divided.

Protecting A Way Of Life

“No amount of money or jobs can replace our way of life,” Nondalton Tribal Council President William Evanoff told the EPA leader. “The threats are real.”

In Dillingham, everyone who spoke to McCarthy was against the Pebble mine. The town of about 2,300 lives and breathes salmon. Weathered buildings display vivid murals celebrating salmon and urging their preservation.

“We are people of fish, we are people of salmon, that is what we depend on,” said Curyung Tribal Chief Tom Tilden. Curyung is the Yupik Indian name for Dillingham. “We want this renewable resource to come back year after year after year so we can continue to be here. Your agency can provide us that opportunity.”

The EPA leader toured the mine site with Pebble officials after leaving Dillingham. Pebble Partnership CEO John Shively said afterward that he assured McCarthy of the company's good intentions. The developers are “committed to building a mine that would create substantial economic activity while protecting the environment and the fishery.”

An EPA study released in April said the mine could wipe out nearly 100 miles of streams and 4,800 acres of wetlands in the region. The EPA said it is finishing the study, which is based on a first round of mine plans submitted to government agencies.

McCarthy rushed out of her Iliamna meeting to catch a plane to Anchorage and refused to take questions. She said before leaving she’s open-minded about Pebble.

“EPA is going to make our decision based on what our legal authority is — no overstretches — and on what the science says and real data,” McCarthy said.

Quiz

- 1 In the section "Creation Or Destruction?" why does Triston Chaney talk about drinking water from a stream when he was a baby?
- (A) to make himself seem more likable to McCarthy
 - (B) to give an example of how he does not use modern technology
 - (C) to explain how things have changed from then to present day
 - (D) to show the importance of clean water in the area

- 2 Read the section "Huge Deposit Of Gold And Copper." Based on information in the section, what is a possible negative effect of NOT building the mine?
- (A) Iliamna's economy will surely collapse and destroy the town.
 - (B) Young men might not have many opportunities for success.
 - (C) Wildlife in the area will not be able to survive any longer.
 - (D) The EPA will have no more control of what goes on in the area.

- 3 Read the following from the section "Protecting A Way Of Life."

"EPA is going to make our decision based on what our legal authority is — no overstretches — and on what the science says and real data," McCarthy said.

What did McCarthy mean when she said "no overstretches"?

- (A) The EPA would not stretch its employees thin by having them work too hard on this case.
- (B) The EPA did not want to stretch the patience of people living in the region affected by the mine.
- (C) The EPA would not stretch the law and make rules that it was not allowed to make about the Pebble mine.
- (D) The EPA could not stretch its visit any further, which is why McCarthy had to leave so quickly.

- 4 Read the following from the introduction [paragraphs 1-4].

President Barack Obama's top environmental official was visibly moved as people in this fishing town told her the giant Pebble Mine would kill wild salmon and destroy their culture.

Which of the following BEST helps readers understand what "moved" means in this context?

- (A) She said the residents' words reminded her of what the EPA works for every day.
- (B) "I intend to make you proud in the position the president has given me," she said to a standing ovation.
- (C) Her speech took place in a packed gymnasium at a Dillingham school.
- (D) McCarthy visited the Bristol Bay region this week as a nationwide debate grows over the proposed mine.

Answer Key

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