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Studies: Coal mine would destroy Cook Inlet salmon streams

Analyses show that damage from PacRim's proposed Chuitna strip-mining operation would be irreversible

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Three new scientific reports conclude that critical salmon fisheries along the Chuit River will suffer severe long-term damage and never fully recover from the impacts of PacRim Coal LP's proposed Chuitna coal strip-mine.

The scientists who completed the analyses concluded that PacRim's plan to strip-mine for coal directly through 11 miles of salmon-bearing streams would significantly damage local wetlands and headwater streams in an area 45 miles west of Anchorage. Restoration of the fragile and valuable wetlands and streams that feed the salmon-rich Chuit River would be virtually impossible, they determined.

The researchers, whose expertise is in reclamation, restoration ecology and fishery and aquatic biology, based their findings on a review of PacRim's hydrology reports and preliminary mining and reclamation plans. The reports are available online at: www.inletkeeper.org/energy/Chuitna90813.htm.

"There is no scientific evidence that wetlands or streams can be put back together to be living, healthy ecosystems after the kind of mining impacts described in the PacRim reports," said Dr. Margaret Palmer, who analyzed PacRim's restoration plans. "The science just isn't there. Experimentation should not be confused with sound, science-based knowledge."

PacRim's Chuitna proposal is in the advanced stages of permitting. If permitted, it would be the first strip mine in Alaska excavated directly through salmon spawning habitat. Despite the damage Alaskan communities will face from the PacRim proposal, almost all of the coal the Delaware-based company produces would be shipped to China and other Pacific Rim countries for their coal-burning power plants.

Key findings of the three analyses include:

- Stream restoration following mining is not possible. PacRim's reclamation plan is based on digging a "new stream" to replicate the physical appearance of the original. There is no evidence that simply restoring the shape of a channel will bring back salmon runs, riparian corridors or other essential biological functions. Past stream restoration projects involving channel modifications with much less damage have been unsuccessful, making PacRim's plans a grand experiment with a stream that produces a significant portion of Chuitna's salmon. (Palmer)
- An extensive search of scientific literature, and discussions with stream restoration and in-stream flow experts did not yield a single documented example of strip-mined salmon habitat being successfully restored. (Trasky)

- The company's surface and groundwater studies are inadequate to determine impacts to the Chuit River drainage from strip-mining and groundwater pumping associated with mining or for restoring essential groundwater flow. Salmon are dependent on groundwater to bring nutrients and oxygen to eggs, and to keep water flowing in streams. (Trasky)
- Re-creating the complex three-dimensional diversity of interconnected underground sediments in salmon habitat, such as Middle Creek, would be impossible. (Wipfli)
- There are no data on the Chuit River's food webs, including type of prey, where the prey comes from, and when and where they are important. There have been no studies on marine nutrients from salmon runs, wetlands, riparian corridors, or headwater streams in supporting the food webs, or how aquatic productivity will be affected by damage from mining. (Wipfli)
- Because salmon populations fluctuate dramatically over decades-long cycles, the few years of data collected is not sufficient to determine natural ranges in salmon populations that would be affected by the Chuitna coal strip mine. (Trasky)

Commercial fishermen, subsistence users and local property owners oppose the mine on the grounds it will contaminate the Chuit River, which supports all five species of Alaska's salmon and has been recognized as one of America's most endangered rivers. They also fear it would destroy surrounding wetlands, wildlife habitat, tributaries and ruin traditional fishing grounds in Cook Inlet. This year, the Chuit River was one of the few rivers in the Cook Inlet region where fisherman enjoyed a healthy King Salmon run.

Terry Jorgensen, a commercial fisherman and Beluga resident, said the reports raise questions about Pac Rim's claims that its mine won't have significant impacts on the Chuit River, and the people who depend on it for their livelihoods.

"The law requires that the mined areas be returned to pre-mining condition after the coal has been extracted, but there is no scientific evidence that a salmon stream mined through in the manner PacRim proposes can ever be restored," Jorgensen said.

Trustees for Alaska commissioned the reports and they were prepared for the Chuitna Citizens Coalition and Cook Inletkeeper. Full titles of the reports are:

- *"Report on Chuitna Coal Project Aquatic Studies and Fish and Wildlife Protection Plan," by Lance Trasky, retired habitat biologist, Alaska Department of Fish and Game.*
- *"Chuitna Coal Mine Baseline Monitoring and Restoration Plan Review," by Dr. Mark Wipfli, Associate Professor of Aquatic Ecology & Fisheries, Institute of Arctic Biology, University of Alaska Fairbanks, an expert on riverine ecology and food webs.*
- *"Report on Chuitna Coal Project of PacRim Coal," by Dr. Margaret A. Palmer, Professor and Director of the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, University of Maryland, author of "The Foundation of Restoration Ecology" and expert on watershed science and stream ecology and restoration.*

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