

Alaskan Mining: Consequences for People and Land

By Dee Hunt

Fueled by rising prices in copper, gold, zinc and uranium, there has been an explosion in mining exploration, development and production in Alaska. Figures from 2005 (\$1.85 billion) to 2006 (\$3.26 billion) show an astounding 76 percent increase.¹ This parallels mining development nationally, particularly in the western U.S., where active mining in 12 states increased 80 percent from January 2003 to July 2007.²

enter rivers, streams or lakes to devastate flora and fauna and pollute drinking water. The large-scale diversion of water systems by mining companies can also diminish access to water by local communities.

For these reasons, Alaska WILPF developed a film series and public forum on industrial mining as part of U.S. WILPF's Water Campaign. We ran the series at three venues: at the Anchorage Museum to reach a general audience; at the University of Alaska, Anchorage to build student leadership on mining issues; and at the Islands and Ocean Visitor Center in Homer, Alaska where citizens are very concerned about development of the proposed Pebble Mine.

If developed, Pebble Mine would be situated at the headwaters of the largest sockeye salmon fishery in the world, in a seismically unstable region. Public controversy over the mine generated Alaska's Clean Water Ballot Initiative, which sought to reinstate water protections



Alaska WILPF Mining Film Series Committee, from left to right, Dee Hunt, Ruth Sheridan, Robyn Lauster, Martha Shaddy.

Aron Crowell photo

For the first time, the largest multinational mining corporations (Anglo American, BHP Billiton, Barrick Gold Corporation) are developing Alaskan projects. If permitted, these mines will represent some of the largest gold, copper, molybdenum and coal mines in the world.

Industrial mining consumes, diverts and can seriously pollute water resources. Of particular concern are the gigantic projects favored by multinational corporations, which impact water during the extraction and processing of minerals and in the disposal of mine waste. The quality and quantity of surface water and groundwater is frequently affected within mines and in the surrounding areas. Tailings³ from the mining of sulfide ores interact with water and air to produce acid mine drainage, which is toxic to many forms of life and can be self-perpetuating. Acid mine drainage also facilitates the release of heavy metals that are poisonous to wildlife and people. Toxic by-products of "heap leaching," the process of chemically extracting mineral from low grade ore, often

that would prevent large-scale mines from releasing contamination harmful to salmon spawning and human health. Given all of this, the WILPF film series was particularly timely. Five months later, Alaskans were to vote "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" on the initiative.

We selected films that looked at mining from several perspectives: the politics of regulation and development (Frontline's *The Curse of Inca Gold* and Oxfam America's *Our Land Our Life*); how mining affects the health and environment of communities near the mines (*Uranium, Black Diamonds, The Curse of Inca Gold*); what companies leave behind for governments and communities to clean up (*Poison in the Rockies*); and a close examination of specific types of impacts, such as acid mine drainage.

Environmental justice, particularly as it relates to Indigenous communities, was a prominent theme in the majority of the films. In rural Alaska many Indigenous communities follow traditional practices of hunting, fish-

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ing and food gathering, often referred to as subsistence. While federal law protects subsistence rights for all communities in rural Alaska, state law prioritizes multiple uses of land. This often results in development that pollutes natural resources.

Following each film, local leaders from tribes, nonprofits and environmental law firms tied the issues raised in the movies to our situation in Alaska. We wanted to convey the growing extent of mining exploration and development; the difference between mining as it operated historically and mining as implemented by multinationals today; and to provide an up-close look at the environmental records and practices of multinationals who want to do business in Alaska. We also wanted to illustrate that federal and state regulations provide little environmental protection, a point of view that contrasts with common public perception.

Sadly, the Clean Water Initiative was defeated by 62 percent of Alaska's voters. Some say that Governor Sarah Palin's personal but very public opposition (she took a full page ad in the *Anchorage Daily News*) to the initiative sealed its defeat. It's also likely that the questionable reputation and politics of the initiative's sponsors (resource development Republicans, not environmentalists) and their funders contributed to its downfall. But, for the moment, multinationals and Alaska's mining industry are the victors, with Governor Palin's resource development priority firmly in place.

Despite this, activists and politicians continue to work toward more stringent regulation of Alaskan mining. As a follow-up to the film series, Alaska WILPF convened a working group to oppose uranium explo-

ration and development on the Seward Peninsula. This working group meets monthly by teleconference and includes tribal leaders, educators, researchers, environmentalists and attorneys from Alaska and the southwestern U.S. The teleconferences are now coordinated by Alaska Community Action on Toxics, a local nonprofit that conducts community-based research and training on public health issues related to environmental contamination. Alaska WILPF was also invited to join Alaskans for Responsible Mining, a coalition directed toward reform of Alaska's permitting process and statutes relevant to mining. Alaska WILPF will be working with other coalition members on uranium issues.

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Dee Hunt was the project leader for "The Consequences of Mining: Films and Forum on Mines, People and the Land," a project of Alaska WILPF. Contact her at dhunt@gci.net.

¹ Alaska's Mineral Industry 2006: A Summary by D.J. Szumigala and R.A. Hughes, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, Division of Geological and Geophysical Surveys.

² Horwitt, Dusty, Oversight Hearing on Hardrock Mining on Federal Land before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, September 27, 2007.

³ Tailings are what is left after removing the valuable mineral from an ore. Tailings are often stored in a dam "in solution," creating a toxic sludge that has to be contained and treated in perpetuity.