

**Alaska Wilderness League * American Rivers * Earthjustice *
Environmental Defense Fund * Friends of the Earth * League of Conservation Voters *
National Audubon Society * Natural Resources Defense Council *
Pew Environment Group * Sierra Club * World Wildlife Fund**

July 23, 2012

Office of Environmental Information (OEI) Docket (Mail Code: 2822T)
Docket # EPA-HQ-ORD-2012-0276
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Ave., N.W.
Washington, DC 20460

Re: Comments on An Assessment of Potential Mining Impacts on Salmon Ecosystems of Bristol Bay, Alaska (Docket # EPA-HQ-ORD-2012-0276)

Dear Administrator Jackson:

We write today on behalf of our millions of members and activists to commend you for undertaking a scientific assessment of the impacts of large-scale mining on the Bristol Bay watershed. Released on May 18, 2012, EPA's draft "Assessment of Potential Mining Impacts on Salmon Ecosystems of Bristol Bay, Alaska" ("Assessment") provides a detailed analysis of the Bristol Bay watershed's natural resources and the half a billion dollar annual economic benefits associated with those resources – including the largest sockeye salmon fishery in the world. EPA found that the Bristol Bay watershed supports all five species of North American Pacific salmon and has sustained Alaska Native communities for centuries. The Assessment also found that Bristol Bay's wild salmon fishery and other ecological resources provide at least 14,000 full and part-time jobs and is valued at about \$480 million annually.

Although the Assessment does not provide an in-depth review of a specific mining project, it does assess the potential environmental impacts associated with mining activities in the region given the nature of mineral deposits in the watershed, the requirements for successful mining development, and publicly available information about potential mining activity. The Assessment concludes that large-scale mining activities would have potentially staggering impacts on the Bristol Bay watershed:

- Inevitable harm to Bristol Bay salmon populations and fisheries. Even at its minimum size, large-scale mining like Pebble Mine would eliminate or block 55 to 87 miles of salmon streams and destroy 2,512 to 4,286 acres of wetlands — key habitat for sockeye salmon and other fish.
- Significant risk of catastrophic failure. EPA evaluated four types of large-scale mine failures and found that "at least one or more accidents of [sic] failures could occur, potentially resulting in immediate, severe impacts on salmon and detrimental, long-term impacts on salmon habitat."
- 98% probability of a pipeline spill with potential contaminant release into streams and wetlands.
- Foreseeable reductions to salmon-dependent wildlife. EPA found that the Bristol Bay watershed provides habitat for numerous species, including 35 fish species, more than 190 bird species and

40 animal species – many of which depend on salmon. Because numerous species feed on salmon – and because salmon affect ecosystem productivity and regional biodiversity due to nutrient transportation – what harms salmon also harms the wildlife that depend on salmon.

- Serious threats to Alaska Native health, society, and culture. Negative impacts on salmon would result in negative impacts on elements of Alaska Native cultures that are highly interrelated with, and dependent on, subsistence resources, including nutrition and physical health, mental and emotional health related to traditional culture, language and traditional culture, extended family relationships, social networks, and economic viability.

EPA’s Assessment provides more than enough information to find with absolute certainty that large-scale mining in the Bristol Bay watershed would pose enormous harm to the watershed’s natural resources and the economic benefits associated with those resources. These findings are even more remarkable given the fact that EPA’s Assessment may actually underestimate some of the risks. For example, the Assessment does not consider the impacts that would result from: (1) the development and operation of a deep-water port in Cook Inlet needed for transportation, (2) secondary development, or (3) planning uncertainties resulting from climate change. It also underestimates the amount of tailings likely to be released in the case of a failure and the distance these tailings would travel. Taken together, these additional foreseeable risk factors unquestionably support a conclusion that large-scale mining would result in “unacceptable adverse effects” to the watershed’s natural resources and recreations, which is the regulatory threshold for initiating action under Section 404(c) of the Clean Water Act.

Given the inevitable adverse effects of large-scale mining in the Bristol Bay watershed, we urge you now to exercise your authority under Section 404(c) of the Clean Water Act. As EPA conducts an independent peer review and finalizes the Assessment, we respectfully request the agency to initiate action under Section 404(c) to proactively protect the Bristol Bay watershed and the communities, salmon, and wildlife that depend on it for survival from the construction of massive mining projects in this location – including the Pebble Mine.

Sincerely,

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