

Hunting in crosshairs if controversial mine built

By Joel Gay
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Anglers are concerned about a proposed mine in the wildlife-rich headwaters of Bristol Bay, Alaska, but they're not alone. Trophy-class moose, caribou and brown bear hunting are also at stake if the Pebble Mine is built as planned.

The mine would be the largest open pit copper and gold mine in North America, threatening water quality in two pristine watersheds and attracting opposition from fly fishermen, angling organizations and businesses such as Orvis and Sage.

But hunters are nervous about Pebble Mine too, prompting Alaska guides and outfitters as well as manufacturers like Hornady, Ruger and Savage Arms to join the effort to prevent large-scale industrial mining from gaining a foothold in the Bristol Bay region.

"Fish will not be the only species to suffer" if Pebble is developed, said Phil Shoemaker, a registered Alaska master guide who has lived, hunted and fished in the Bristol Bay region for decades. In a letter to *Successful Hunter* magazine, he wrote that moose, caribou and the world-renowned brown bears of western Alaska all owe their existence to healthy salmon runs.

"Without salmon," Shoemaker wrote, "the entire region's ecosystem will collapse."

Pebble Mine is just part of a mining district envisioned in the heart of the Bristol Bay region, spanning some 540 square miles. Bristol Bay has the greatest commercial salmon fishery in the world, as well as world-class sport fishing for rainbow trout and salmon. Together the fisheries generate nearly \$450 million a year in revenue and more than half of all private sector jobs in the region.

Now, however, two multinational companies have applied to build the Pebble complex on the divide between two of Bristol Bay's most productive salmon rivers, the Kvichak and the Nushagak. The developers have not released their final plans, but they estimate the Pebble complex itself would cover more than 54 square miles and produce up to 10 billion tons of mine waste, including sulfuric acid, heavy metals and possibly cyanide.

The construction and operations would be disruptive enough, local hunters and fishermen say, but what worries them most is the waste. Mine tailings would be stored at the site, including millions of gallons of toxic liquid held in the largest earthen dam on Earth. Plans call for leaving the mine waste in place forever, even though the site is in one of the most



Alaska hunting guide Brendan Burns (left) poses with friend Andy Klemmerfeldt and a monster bull moose Burns took in the Nushagak River drainage of Alaska. The Nushagak and other major rivers in the Bristol Bay region would likely suffer from toxic mine waste runoff if Pebble Mine is built in the watershed. (Photo courtesy Brendan Burns)

seismically active zones on the planet.

The potential impact of the mine on wildlife and habitat has prompted numerous hunters to speak out, including Mike Fifer, president and CEO of Sturm, Ruger and Co.

"Hunting is an integral part of our American heritage, and it is important to help protect critical wildlife habitats to ensure that our hunting opportunities continue," he said. "We believe that the Pebble Mine is not worth the risk – there are much better ways to create jobs while saving so much of what is truly wonderful about Alaska."

In many places the Bristol Bay uplands are more water than land, but the area is teeming with big game including caribou, moose and brown bear. The Mulchatna Caribou Herd is one of the largest herds in Alaska, migrating throughout the Bristol Bay region. As recently as 1996 the Mulchatna herd was conservatively estimated at nearly 200,000 animals and was popular among nonresident hunters.

The herd has dwindled in recent years, however, prompting the Alaska Department of Game and Fish to close the Mulchatna caribou hunt to nonresidents. The

cause of the decline is unknown and is likely weather-related and/or density dependent, according to ADFG. Mining development in one of the herd's traditional calving areas would add yet more pressure to the already-declining Mulchatna herd.

John Cornell, NMWF's sportsman organizer in southern New Mexico, has hunted Mulchatna caribou before and would like to go back, but said he is concerned about the potential impacts of Pebble and other mines would have on wildlife and hunting.

"The proposed mining zone is so big that I'm afraid it could have ripple effects throughout the Bristol Bay region," Cornell said.

"The Mulchatna caribou herd is struggling now, but it could go downhill even further if mega-mining begins. You can't develop mines over a 500-square-mile area and expect everything to be the same. Wildlife will suffer. And I would hate to see that happen because hunting in Alaska is incredible – something every hunter should experience at least once. It's unimaginable that something this invasive and destructive would even be considered for one of the most wild and pristine landscapes on the planet."

Trophy moose and bear hunts still draw nonresidents to the Nushagak River drainage, said Larry Bartlett of Fairbanks, whose company, Pristine Ventures, helps do-it-yourself hunters plan and outfit their Alaska hunting and fishing trips.

Almost any Alaska hunt is a major undertaking, but the potential payoff is also huge. In the Nushagak drainage below the proposed Pebble Mine site, the minimum legal size for moose is 50 inches (or four brow tines), and hunters in that area have taken animals with 70-inch racks. The biggest brown bears on the planet inhabit the Southwest Alaska coast, but

the salmon-rich Nushagak and Kvichak river drainages that Pebble Mine's waste water would drain into draw big bears upstream every fall.

Bartlett, a member of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, said his business might actually improve if Pebble were built, due to the sudden increase in mine employment and the general attention the mine would bring to the Bristol Bay region.

And it's true, he added, that mining has provided the raw materials for a higher standard of living. But in the long run he fears the mine would hurt the region, its wildlife and opportunities for hunters and anglers.

"We've all made money off the fact that our technology has improved" thanks to the Industrial Revolution and resource development in general, he said, "but I'm opposed to the idea of carelessness with those resources. And the history of mining shows that the bureaucrats talk a great game during the planning process, but it doesn't usually pan out that way. The environmental standards look great on paper. But history shows that mines don't do that well environmentally," Bartlett continued.

"I see history repeating itself, and there's no reason to believe Bristol Bay will be any different."

Thousands of Bristol Bay hunters and fishermen, along with dozens of nationally-known outdoor gear companies have come to the same conclusion, among them Jonathan Hart, founder of Sitka Gear hunting products. The Bristol Bay region's fish and wildlife are a sustainable resource, he said, but the long-term economic health of the region depends on those resources and is threatened by large-scale mining.

"If my kids and your kids can't hunt and fish there when they're older," Hart said, "we've screwed up big time."

What you can do

The Environmental Protection Agency completed a scientific assessment of the Bristol Bay watershed in May. New Mexico Wildlife Federation and more than two dozen other New Mexico sportsmen's organizations and business owners have urged the EPA to take the next logical step to protect Bristol Bay from industrial-scale mining by crafting restrictions that would prevent toxic materials from migrating into fish-bearing streams and rivers. For more information, go to www.SaveBristolBay.org/TakeAction.



Proposed mining development in the Bristol Bay watershed threatens water quality and wildlife habitat throughout the region, prompting widespread opposition by hunters, anglers and area residents.