

Controversial Alaska mine project wins one in Congress

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Supporters of the embattled Pebble Mine project in Alaska are making a desperate effort in Congress and the courts to keep it alive in the face of warnings from the Environmental Protection Agency that it could devastate the finest run of wild salmon left on the globe.

Members of the U.S. House of Representatives are pushing a bill to keep the EPA from blocking the mine, despite opposition from Washington state lawmakers who say the [project](#) could be devastating to the fishing industry in their state.

The mine developer, Northern Dynasty Minerals, is suing the EPA, seeking an injunction to prevent the agency from moving to stop the project.

The developer is in trouble. Mining giants Anglo American and Rio Tinto pulled out of the project in the midst of the controversy, leaving Northern Dynasty scrambling for another partner to provide financial support for the mine. Getting the EPA to back off would help.

After a long series of setbacks, the mine won a small victory Wednesday when the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee approved the bill for a vote in the full House.

The measure would have scant chance of making it through the Democratic-controlled Senate and surviving a likely presidential veto. But mine opponents fear it might become a platform to revive the

project's fortunes, particularly if Republicans take control of the Senate after the November midterm elections.

The fishing and conservation group Trout Unlimited said it planned to launch a social media campaign to rally fishermen to campaign against the bill.

The mine developer "has lost most of its financial backing because of the inherent risks of the proposed mine, and its many failures to produce a viable mining plan. But now the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is rushing to take up the beleaguered cause," Trout Unlimited said in an email.

EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy said the Pebble Mine would "likely have significant and irreversible negative impacts on the salmon of Bristol Bay."

McCarthy said the EPA would take action to protect the salmon under the Clean Water Act. That could lead to a veto of the project prior to its permit applications.

Rep. Bob Gibbs, R-Ohio, sponsor of the bill, said the mine should be allowed a chance. His measure would forbid the EPA from halting a project before the permit process.

"It's un-American to tell a private company or anybody that you can't even apply for a permit, cannot even consider doing any operations on this land because the government has blocked it out," he said.

The National Mining Association also criticized the EPA, with its president, Hal Quinn, saying investors need confidence that the agency won't pre-emptively block a project.

"EPA's actions trampled the authority of the state of Alaska, pre-empted the role of other federal and state agencies and potentially stranded the mining company's \$700 million in capital investment," Quinn said.

Washington state lawmakers are leading the fight in Congress against the mine. Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., asked the White House to stop the mine and participated in a rally earlier this year on the Seattle waterfront that included 250 chefs and other food workers protesting the project.

Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., attempted to stop the bill Wednesday in the committee. He said thousands of fishermen and processors from Washington state depended on the Bristol Bay fishery in Alaska. The EPA's decision to consider vetoing the mine followed three years of study of the damage that what would be North America's largest open-pit mine could do to the salmon, he said.

"If this bill goes forward it could lead to the construction of a mine that would have devastating economic impacts for many people in Washington state," Larsen said.

Sue Aspelund, the executive director of the Bristol Bay Regional Seafood Development Association, complained that fishermen weren't given a chance to testify.

"It's incredibly unfortunate that Congress is debating legislation that would directly impact Bristol Bay's commercial fishermen while thousands of them are currently contributing to yet another historic sockeye salmon season in southwest Alaska," Aspelund said.

The EPA said it began studying the mine at the request of Alaska tribes and others concerned about the salmon. Mine advocates assert the agency was biased and that agency staffers themselves initiated the effort to block the project. The EPA's inspector general is investigating

those allegations.

While the Pebble Mine project may appear near death, tensions still run high.

Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, lashed out at a hearing Wednesday when a Maryland congresswoman charged that the bill is nothing but a giveaway to the mine developer.

Young said his state should get to decide whether to build the massive open-pit [copper](#) mine, not the EPA or members of Congress from outside Alaska.

"Now we have somebody from Maryland telling me how we should represent that state. Disgusting," said Young, who started shouting and pointing his finger.

"I'll be damned if I'm going to sit here and watch somebody from Maryland or any other state start telling me or anybody in Alaska how we should be running our state."

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