

Chilean environmentalists fight to protect glaciers from mining dust

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Climatologist professor Fabrice Lambert says dust from the mining industry is a danger to Chile's glaciers

Chile is home to four-fifths of South America's glaciers and has some of the largest ice fields in the world outside the polar regions, but they are coming under threat from mining industry dust.

Climatologist Fabrice Lambert from Chile's Catholic University believes that the country's 24,114 [glaciers](#) are in danger from [mining](#) activity, although the direct cause and effect are hard to establish.

"The dust generated by mining can settle on the glaciers, covering the white surface so the particles absorb solar energy that results in rapid glacial melting," Lambert told AFP.

It's a problem because "some glaciers in Chile are close to mines," he says.

Sara Larrain, director at the Sustainable Chile environmental NGO, says the country needs legislation like its neighbor Argentina to protect its glaciers, but says such proposals keep getting stonewalled by the powerful mining sector.

"Since 2005, there have been six or seven glacial protection projects presented to senators or deputies but every time they've been blocked by the mining sector," she said.

Joaquin Villarino, president of Chile's Mining Council, says such laws aren't necessary.

"More than 70 percent of mining activity takes place in areas where there are no glaciers," he said.

Chilean glaciers

One of earth's biggest water reserves
More than **24,000** glaciers



Surface area: About **23,000 sq. km**

Threats

- Climate change
- Mining activity



Map of Chile's major glaciers, one of the planet's fresh water reserves

In any case, under current legislation "there is certain protection that prevents mining companies from damaging existing glaciers."

For Lambert, there's a happy medium to be struck somewhere.

"They're not going to close the mines within the next five years, but we need to find a way to protect the glaciers without destroying the [mining industry](#), which is essential to the country's economy."

Chile's economy depends on mining. It's the world's biggest producer of copper with around 5.6 million tons, a third of global production.

'No glacial protection'

Environmental law specialist Pilar Moraga says that Chile urgently needs a legal framework to specifically protect the glaciers.

In 2014 a bill was introduced in Congress to ban certain dangerous industrial activities near the glaciers.

But the bill underwent several damaging modifications before it was finally ditched altogether by the government of right-wing President Sebastian Pinera in June.



Fabrice Lambert fears that government failure to protect glaciers, coupled with climate change, could have a devastating effect

The government says that existing rules aimed at protecting biodiversity and the country's national parks and reserves are ample enough.

But specialists complain that not all of Chile's glaciers are located in protected parks.

"In Chile, 86.4 percent of glaciers are in protected zones, but in the center and the north of the country, where water scarcity worsens every day, there's no protection for glaciers," said Lambert.

He added that "climatic projections" in those regions "predict a 30 percent decrease in rainfall over the next 50 years."

As glaciers are formed out of the compacting of accumulated snow, such a major reduction in rainfall would have a massive impact on the regeneration of glaciers that are reduced by meltwater during the summer.

Mining industry representatives deny they've put pressure on authorities and have praised the decision to block any further regulation.

"The government has made a responsible decision that carries a political cost. It's a well thought-out decision," Villarino told AFP.

All is not lost for environmentalists, though, as Minister for the Environment Marcela Cubillos announced two weeks ago the creation of regional committees of experts tasked with finding "an effective solution to protect glaciers."

However, legislators have blocked a pair of other bills aimed at preventing glacier water from being privately controlled, and declaring the glaciers "national treasures" to limit their use to activities linked to science and tourism.

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