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PAGE 13



A dilemma for Alaskans: gold or fish?

Near Bristol Bay in Alaska is a deposit of metals so vast that no one seems able to measure it all. Exploiting the site, however, would threaten one of the world's last sustainable fisheries

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Top left: Jonathan Hobson, left, and Eric Vanlandingham at an exploratory drill for the proposed Pebble Mine site in Iliamna, Alaska. The area is believed to be stocked with gold and copper and could potentially be the largest mine in North America.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Top right: Spawning sockeye salmon in Hansen Creek near Aleknagik Lake in Aleknagik, Alaska. Fishermen, conservationists and some Alaskan Native groups fear unearthing metals in Pebble Mine could release chemicals that are toxic to the salmon, which are central to a fishing industry worth at least US\$300 million each year.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Above: Gernot Wober, left and John Shively are from of a consortium of Canadian and British companies that has already spent US\$300 million exploring Pebble Mine.

PHOTO: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

Just up the fish-rich rivers that surround this tiny bush town on Bristol Bay is a discovery of copper and gold so vast and valuable that no one seems able to measure it all. Then again, no one really knows the value of the rivers, either. They are the priceless headwaters of one of the world's last great runs of Pacific salmon.

"Perhaps it was God who put these two great resources right next to each other," said John T. Shively, the chief executive of a foreign consortium that wants to mine the copper and gold deposit. "Just to see what people would do with them."

What people are doing is fighting as Alaskans hardly have before. While experts say the mine could yield more than US\$300 billion in metals and hundreds of jobs for struggling rural Alaska, unearthing the metals could mean releasing chemicals that are toxic to the salmon that are central to

a fishing industry worth at least US\$300 million each year. And while the metals are a finite discovery, the fish have replenished themselves for millenniums.

"If they have one spill up there, what's going to happen?" said Steve Shade, 50, an Alaska Native who has fished on Bristol Bay all his life, for dinner and for a living. "This is our livelihood. They're going to ruin it for everybody."

Rarely are Alaskans at odds over which of their natural resources they want to exploit. Oil? Timber? Minerals? Fish? While outsiders and some state residents may urge restraint, most people here typically just select all.

Yet the fight over what is known as the Pebble Mine is playing out as a war between economies and cultures, between copper and clean water, gold and wild salmon. Strange alliances and divisions have developed. Miners have been pitted against fishermen, as have Yupik Eskimos, Aleuts and Athabascan Indians and other Alaska Native people who want the jobs the new mine could bring versus those who fear that it threatens thousands of years of culture.

Now the fight is expanding, from the bush to the ballot.

On Tuesday, Alaskans will vote on Measure 4, an initiative intended to increase protections for streams where salmon live. Over just a few months, the measure has become one of the most expensively fought campaigns in state history, with the two sides expected to spend a total of more than US\$10 million. Opponents of the measure have outraised supporters by more than two to one.

The vote is expected to be close, and doomsday scenarios abound, sketched by supporters and opponents through television, radio and Internet advertisements that evoke things like exploding mine sites, vibrant red sockeye, sturdy-looking miners worried about their jobs and sturdy-looking fishermen worried about their jobs. Jewelers, including Tiffany & Co, have pledged not to use gold from Pebble Mine, while some powerful corporations run by Alaska Native groups say the mine is crucial to the rural economy.

Fear prevails, on both sides, even though it could be 2010 before developers submit a formal application to the state to build Pebble Mine and many more years before the first ore is extracted.

"I've never been a guy who's been in bed with the environmental movement," said Brian Gannon, who manages a small salmon processing plant north of Dillingham and supports Measure 4, "but this is about survival for me."

Opponents to the Pebble Mine worry that it will open the entire area to mining. For now, the most likely possibility is that Pebble would be a combination of open-pit and underground, because of the way minerals are dispersed. Both

methods could require huge holding areas for toxic mine waste with walls dozens of meters high, as well as a facility for processing ore, pumps that remove millions of liters of water from the ground and an 130km road in an area that is now accessible only by helicopter.

"It's going to have to be the most environmentally tight mine ever designed on planet Earth if it's going to go," said Ed Fogels, director of project management and permitting at the Alaska Department of Natural Resources. "That's unequivocal."

But speaking of the Pebble Mine site, where exploratory drilling rigs have already sampled more than 700 sections of the deposit, Fogels added: "We're supposed to be managing it for multiple uses. There's this mandate that we need to somehow make a living off Alaska's state land."

It is unclear what impact Measure 4 would have if it passed. Supporters play down its reach, saying it would strengthen protections for salmon at new mine sites, but mining companies and the Alaska Native corporations allied with them cast it as a veiled effort to shut down the state's growing mining industry by putting up new legal obstacles in the permit process.

"It's broad, it's unspecific, it's going to be subject to many legal challenges," said Willis Lyford, campaign director for Alaskans Against the Mining Shutdown, which is spending more than US\$6 million, largely provided by the mining industry, to fight the initiative.

Opponents criticize supporters, led by the groups Renewable Resources Coalition and Alaskans for Clean Water, for relying on money from national political groups and other big donors, including Robert B. Gillam, a wealthy Republican investor who owns a 1,000m² fishing and hunting getaway about 50km from the proposed mine.

Supporters of Measure 4, who qualified it for the ballot by collecting more than 30,000 signatures of registered voters, say their diversity reflects the range of opposition to the mine, including sport fishermen, commercial fishing companies, environmentalists and Alaska Native groups. They cite a variety of mining projects that have damaged fisheries in the West.

Supporters say an initiative like Measure 4 is necessary because they have fewer tools to fight Pebble Mine since the proposed site is on state land, not federal. They say state officials, however concerned they may be about fisheries and environmental health, are essentially in the business of granting permits, not denying them. The lack of a federal role, they say, has kept Pebble Mine at a lower profile than debates over drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife

Refuge or logging in the Tongass National Forest.

"We're just trying to convince Alaskans that, OK, we can have mining, just not in this place," said Tim Bristol, director of Trout Unlimited Alaska. "It's such an exceptional risk to such an exceptional fishery."

Specifically, the measure would prevent new large-scale mines from releasing toxins into water where salmon live. State officials have said that the language essentially duplicates existing regulations. If the measure passes, said Fogels, of the Department of Natural Resources, "we don't anticipate doing anything different."

Others disagree and expect a long legal battle if the measure becomes law.

Shively, the chief executive of Pebble Partnership, the consortium of Canadian and British companies that have already spent more than US\$300 million exploring the mine site, was hired this spring in part to counter the idea that Pebble Mine would mostly benefit foreign investors with little interest in the state's economic or environmental health.

"I certainly don't want my legacy to be that we destroyed a fishery or part of a fishery," said Shively, who first came to the state in the 1960s as an advocate for Alaska Natives, and has since served in a variety of roles, including with a powerful Alaska Native corporation and as a vice president for the cruise line Holland America. "But if we can do it correctly, I'd love to see it done, because I think the benefits are huge."

The mine site, roughly 10km² miles in size, sits in a remote valley northeast of Dillingham and about 10 minutes by helicopter from the small Alaska Native village of Iliamna. An active volcano spews steam not far away — yet another risk, as are earthquakes, say the mine's opponents. Iliamna has been transformed into a base camp for workers doing the exploratory drilling, environmental testing and other advance work on the mine. Unlike many other bush villages, Iliamna, reachable only by plane or snowmobile, now has a smoothly paved landing strip, fresh asphalt on its few roads and a new post office and medical clinic.

Some Alaska Natives have found work as housekeepers or food-service workers in the mess hall that serves three meals a day. A few work at the mine site itself. Average salaries for mine workers in Alaska are around US\$70,000, and a handful of shiny new pickups and all-terrain vehicles now zoom through town. The pavement ends quickly, for the moment.

"There's more cars here now than you can shake a stick at," said Mickey Dungate, 84, who with his wife, Kay, runs a summer fishing lodge. This summer, Dungate leased one of his buildings to mine employees.