

## **Thanks to Murkowski, Pebble permitting is in wrong hands**

**Compass: Points of view from the community**

By MARK RICHARDS

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Recently, Ginger Johnson, board member of Truth About Pebble, the organization devoted to seeing the giant Pebble Mine Project come to fruition, said in the Daily News: "There are strict laws that must be followed for any mine to be built. Pebble will require 67 different permits. There are processes in place to ensure that developments like Pebble mine are safe."

What she and Truth About Pebble neglect to tell us is that those "strict laws" that are supposed to "ensure that developments like Pebble mine are safe" were watered down considerably by the Murkowski administration in order to grease the skids for more resource development like the Pebble Project.

For nearly 50 years, the Habitat and Restoration Division of the Alaska Department of Fish and Game effectively oversaw permitting of mines to ensure adequate protections of our fisheries and waters.

Under Frank Murkowski, the habitat division was removed by executive order and placed within the Department of Natural Resources. Thirty percent of the former Habitat division positions were cut.

Executive Order 107 effectively removed permitting authority from the agency committed to ensuring sustainable fisheries and gave that authority to the agency committed to resource development. It was no secret that Murkowski did this at the behest of the timber and mining industry.

During the last legislative session, House Bill 41 sought to overturn the executive order and return the Habitat and Restoration Division and its permitting authority back to Fish and Game. During hearings on HB 41, one of the most telling testimonies as to why moving the division was a grave mistake came from fish and game habitat biologist Matthew LaCroix.

LaCroix worked in the Habitat division of Fish and Game prior to the move. He was one of the habitat biologists transferred to the new Office of Habitat Management and Permitting within DNR, where he worked for two and one-half years.

He got to witness first hand how having permitting authority within DNR was negatively affecting the future of our fisheries and waters. He saw how the analysis

and opinions of habitat biologists on various projects were now discounted or changed in order to better suit the desires of resource extraction and development. He saw how the "corporate culture" and mission of DNR so differed from the culture and mission of the Department of Fish and Game.

Unfortunately, HB 41 never moved out of committee for a floor vote. As of this writing, Governor Palin has refused to rescind the executive order, which she has the authority as governor to do.

The end result?

What could be the largest open pit mine in North America, in the heart of Bristol Bay watersheds that produce one of the world's last great wild salmon runs, is being permitted by the very agency committed to seeing such projects take place. We have lost the checks and balances formerly in place. As LaCroix said, "The benefit of the doubt is (now) given to project proponents and developers, as opposed to the resource."

The current "spin" by Pebble supporters is the same spin Ginger Johnson is using: "There are processes in place to ensure that developments like Pebble mine are safe."

But are they enough?

Ask yourself why the mining industry lobbied to revamp our system of permitting mines, and why Murkowski among all our former governors would suddenly negate the wisdom and foresight of our first legislators and remove the system of checks and balances that had served us so well for so long?

Ask yourself, too, if a cut in experienced habitat biologists and staff, along with a desire for faster permitting times, is better for the resource or the project proponents.

The real truth about Pebble is that we aren't being told the whole truth.

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[www.legis.state.ak.us/basis/get\\_minutes\\_comm.asp?hse=H&session=25&comm=FSH&date=20070214&time=0832](http://www.legis.state.ak.us/basis/get_minutes_comm.asp?hse=H&session=25&comm=FSH&date=20070214&time=0832)