

Exploratory Drilling for Copper to Begin on Catface Mountain, Clayoquot Sound

In April 2008, Vancouver-based Selkirk Metals Corporation applied to begin exploratory drilling for copper on Catface Mountain, after signing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ahousaht Band Council. Catface Mountain lies in the traditional territory of Ahousaht First Nation, 3 km from the village of Ahousaht.

Drilling and other tests would determine whether it is economically feasible to develop the low-grade copper-molybdenum deposit on Catface into a huge open pit mine. The mine would be one of the biggest industrial projects on Vancouver Island and, ironically, would be located in the heart of the Clayoquot Sound UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

A consultant's report prepared for the company reveals the immense scale of operations that would be required — removing the top third or more of Catface Mountain, including its old growth forest; burying valleys and lowlands below the mountain with waste rock rubble and a toxic tailings pond; and building an ore-processing plant and deepwater port. Erosion and runoff from an open pit mine, possible sulphuric acid drainage, heavy metal leaching into surrounding salmon streams, overflow of the tailings dam due to 3-plus metres of annual rainfall, and shipping through the pristine waters of Clayoquot Sound are other aspects of environmental degradation that would occur.

The consultant's report lists local opposition as the number one threat to the venture, and they're right about that! There will be massive opposition from environmental groups, from local to international, and from the town of Tofino, known worldwide for its scenery and wilderness tourism opportunities. Tofino is located 13 km south of Catface and looks out onto the mountain.

Ahousahts themselves are deeply divided on the issue. Some are opposed, worried about environmental degradation and disturbance to their culturally important mountain. Others are in favour, encouraged by the prospect of jobs and economic benefits to their remote, poverty-stricken community that has 65% unemployment. The previous mining company tried unsuccessfully for six years to negotiate an exploration protocol with Ahousaht. In fall 2006, hereditary chiefs and band members said "no." However, in January 2008 band members voted in favour of the memorandum, although hereditary chiefs remain opposed.

A band councillor explained the council felt compelled to sign the exploration memorandum because it will provide jobs and economic opportunities for Ahousaht, as well as a signing bonus and annual payments. If exploration shows a profitable mine can be developed, a band referendum and a new agreement would be required for actual mining to proceed.