

Will the Province Risk Habitat Restoration in the Hopes of Striking Gold?

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Touquoy open-pit gold mine in Moose River, Nova Scotia.
PHOTO: Raymond Plourde

Despite pushback from numerous stakeholders, Atlantic Mining Nova Scotia (AMNS), also known as Atlantic Gold, is proposing an open-pit gold mine at the heart of an ongoing habitat restoration and research project for Atlantic salmon in the province.

Atlantic Mining Nova Scotia

AMNS is owned by St Barbara Ltd – an Australia-based gold-mining company. They currently operate the Touquoy Gold Mine in Moose River and have proposed to extend their operations to Beaver Dam, Cochrane Hill and Five Mile Stream. According to the project’s environmental impact statement (EIS), this would result in “approximately 208 ha of direct habitat disturbance.” Twenty-six hectares of damage would be on crown lands, creating further cause for an environmental assessment, but the process so far has been cloudy.

In 2022 the project proponent asked for an extension on the time limit to submit information and studies under the Canadian Environmental Assessment Act, 2012. Without said extension, the environmental assessment process would be restarted under the Impact Assessment Act, 2019. AMNS stated there would be minimal changes to the project and all consultation and engagement was underway. At a community engagement meeting, the project has increased from one open-pit mine to four and operations for 10 years instead of six years as originally stated. Because of the already-massive footprint and various changes to the project, stakeholders are calling for an entire overhaul of the project’s environmental assessment.

“The Beaver Dam Mine infrastructure placement (i.e., mine site footprint or layout) will result in approximately 208 ha of direct habitat disturbance, of which 26 ha, or 14%, is on crown land.”

- Beaver Dam Mine Project EIS Update
Version 3, Atlantic Gold (2021).

With AMNS’s history of breaking environmental laws and the impacts of their ever-growing proposed open pit mine, various stakeholders in the province are extremely concerned about the damage this mine could cause. AMNS was charged in provincial court under the Fisheries Act and the Environment Act in February 2022. The company paid over \$250,000; with \$10,000 being court fines and \$120,000 directed to both the Environmental Damages Fund by the Government of Canada and the Nova Scotia Salmon Association (NSSA). The NSSA was not in favour of the handout, rather in opposition of the project moving forward altogether.

Salmon habitat restoration efforts in jeopardy

The NSSA released a 24-page document outlining their opposition to the project and the detrimental impacts it could have on the environment. Their six major concerns included:

- The sensitivity of the West River Sheet Harbour restoration efforts.
- Inadequate coverage in the EIS about the affected watersheds.
- The proximity of the project to the Killag River.
- The spatial extent of the project.
- Minimal benefits to Nova Scotia from the proposed mine projects in comparison to the NSSA’s restoration efforts.
- An overall lack of confidence in AMNS to conserve and protect the environment.

The NSSA is responsible for helping replenish the Atlantic salmon species in the province through their acid rain mitigation initiatives in the West River Sheet Harbour watershed, established in 2001. Human impacts on watersheds have decreased the Atlantic salmon populations drastically.

Studies by the Norwegian Institute for Water Research in partnership with the NSSA determined potential solutions including physical habitat restoration like river clearing, and both in-stream and air-dosed limestone deposits. The NSSA’s work to implement these initiatives has allowed the juvenile salmon population to soar from 3,000 to 11,000 in the Killag River alone! The NSSA operates the only in-stream lime dosing operations in North America.

Atlantic salmon swimming in the Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec.
PHOTO: Nick Hawkins



A lime dozer that the NSSA set up on the Killag River to restore wild Atlantic salmon habitat near the site of the proposed Beaver Dam mine.
PHOTO: Raymond Plourde

TAKE ACTION

Follow along with the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada (IAAC) on the progress of the project and respond during the EA public comment period to voice your concerns. Write to your federal member of parliament (MP) and provincial member of the legislative assembly (MLA) and tell them that you oppose the Beaver Dam Mine Project.

Atlantic salmon in Nova Scotia

The Atlantic salmon is a key species in Nova Scotian watersheds. Despite habitat restoration efforts, the adult salmon population in the province has faced major decline over time and is nearing extirpation.

The Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada recognizes the species to range from 'threatened' to 'endangered' throughout the province, yet it is only federally seen as endangered in the inner Fundy region.

The Atlantic salmon is resilient and adaptable with a complex lifecycle. These fish are anadromous, meaning they live in both freshwater and saltwater depending on their stage of life. The pea-sized orange eggs are deposited in the gravel of streams in the fall to hatch in the spring. The hatchlings are known as alevin and feed on microscopic nutrients until they become a fry. The fish have internal and external changes that prepare them for saltwater as they become parr. These fish swim against the current in streams where they change into juveniles, or smolt. Smolt remember their location as they journey downstream so they can return for spawning. They finally reach maturity as adult salmon for spawning. They return to their place of birth, laying up to 1,500 eggs per pound of adult salmon.

Millbrook First Nation opposition

These fish have provided valuable resources for First Nations communities while holding cultural, social and economic importance since time immemorial. Chief Robert Gloade of Millbrook First Nation submitted a letter on behalf of the community in opposition to the AMNS project. A Traditional Land and Resource Use Study and Community Consultation Report have been completed and a Health and Wellness Study is underway to document various concerns that have been heard from citizens.

The EIS document submitted to the Impact Assessment Agency of Canada by the Beaver Dam Mine Project explicitly states that the current land-use for the First Nation community is important and would be heavily impacted by this project.

“There are a number of activities associated with the harvest and use of plants, animals and fish within the project area that relate to historical traditions and customs of the Mi'kmaq that are still practiced today... This means the area was, and still is, an important resource area for the Millbrook First Nation community members and by extension, all Mi'kmaq of Nova Scotia.”

- Beaver Dam Mine Project EIS Update Version 3, Atlantic Mining (2021).

This is not the first project that has been opposed by numerous stakeholders within the province. Only time will tell if protection of this ecosystem will be prioritized over economic gains for AMNS.

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