

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Bristol Bay Senate Floor Speech

January 31st, 2022

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

CANTWELL: Mr. President, I rise today to applaud the Biden administration in their historic step to permanently protect Bristol Bay, Alaska.

More than a decade after the Pebble Mine was proposed the Environmental Protection Agency today is finalizing a Clean Water Act protection that will permanently protect Bristol Bay.

No company will ever be able to stick a mine on top of some of the best salmon habitat in the world.

Salmon fishermen from Alaska and from my home state of Washington will continue to earn their livelihoods from Bristol Bay salmon as they have for generations.

No Bristol Bay salmon will ever have to swim through toxic soup just to get to its spawning grounds. And this scientific decision today by the Environmental Protection Agency puts a final nail in this mine proposal.

It's difficult to understand and to really know the importance of Bristol Bay. In an average year 40 to 60 million sockeye salmon swim in or out of the bay. Last year was a blockbuster run: nearly 80 million sockeye salmon returned to Bristol Bay. That is why Bristol Bay is known as the holy grail of salmon.

Today, Bristol Bay salmon fisheries are a \$2.2 billion annual industry. They support over 15,000 jobs in the Pacific Northwest and nationwide. That is through commercial fishing, recreational fishing, tourism, seafood, restaurants, shipbuilding, and other associated industries.

I know the presiding officer knows this well, because Northern California also benefits from these salmon sectors and the salmon industry.

Salmon are one of the most important products that we in the Pacific Northwest have. It is the symbol of our region. So Bristol Bay salmon, being a powerhouse and supporting nearly half of the sockeye salmon harvested around the globe are certainly worth fighting for.

So as you can imagine, when a mining corporation decided to try to build a mine in the headwaters of this most powerful salmon run on the planet, fishermen in my state and many other states were outraged.

Estuaries and mines really don't mix. And they certainly don't belong together at the headwaters of one of the most important salmon runs and spawning grounds in the nation.

For fishermen, the destruction wrought by Pebble Mine would have swept away their businesses, their way of life, and they certainly raised their voices and came to ask me and others in Washington for help.

In 2011, I was proud to stand with fishermen and tribes from my state and from Alaska to speak out against Pebble Mine and to call for permanent protections under the Clean Water Act if the science showed that the mine would have irreversible impacts on salmon.

Well, sure enough, the science is damning. And that is what is being released as part of this decision today.

In 2020, the Environmental Protection Agency found that more than 185 miles of streams and over 3800 acres of wetlands would be permanently damaged or destroyed by Pebble Mine due to its toxic waste and habitat destruction.

And that's just if the mine operated the way it was supposed to. That wasn't considering the kind of degradation that could happen if an accident happened. Those statistics don't account for a potential mine disaster that could really wipe out this irreplaceable ecosystem.

So despite the clear science, the mining company has continued to claim that protecting Bristol Bay is a partisan government overreach. Their executives believe that stripping all the gold and copper out of Bristol Bay is a worthy goal. More important than our wild salmon or more important than the generations of Washington and Alaska fishermen who earn their livelihood from that.

Protecting our fishing economy should not be a partisan issue. And that is why Congress created a failsafe Clean Water Act provision called Section 404(C). This provision says that if disposal or dredging in a waterway would destroy a fishery, municipal water, or other serious impacts, the Environmental [Protection] Agency could step in to stop the project.

It's a simple concept really, let's not destroy a profitable, sustainable, industry that keeps the water clean for the sake of just temporary extracting.

Still this authority on 404(C), isn't used lightly. Since 1972, millions of Clean Water Act permits have been approved compared to only 14 times that this provision has been used to stop major projects like the one today that is being stopped at Pebble Mine.

Republican Presidents have used this clean water 404(C) authority 11 times. Let me say that, again. It's only been implemented 14 times in our history, and 11 times it was used by Republican President. Ronald Reagan alone use the Clean Water Act 404(C) authority 8 times.

So there was a time when people believed in this conservation. They believed in making sure that we've preserved what is so unique about our planet.

To sum it up, a multinational corporation thought that it could go to one of the most iconic salmon runs on the planet, and decimate those jobs that we rely on in Bristol Bay, and tear a hole in the culture of our Northwest fabric. And fishermen and we here said no.

I'm proud of the scientific work done by the Environmental Protection Agency under President Biden, the University of Washington, and so many of the environmental partners that fought so hard to stop this project.

I'm proud to have stood with the fishermen and tribes of Bristol Bay and saying we need to protect this unique place forever.

I want to thank some of our greatest champions, the United Tribes and Bristol Bay, the Bristol Bay Native Corporation, the fishing families in Alaska and Washington. I want to thank my staff Nikky Teutschel, Amit Ronen, and Jeff Watters, who through a decade all continued this fight to make sure that every administration was listening to this cause.

It seemed like a David and Goliath many times, this battle. But we know today that the voices of fishermen at Bristol Bay provided the leadership that we needed to preserve this area forever and said no to this project.

Fishermen know that the Pacific Northwest salmon is worth more than copper and today salmon is even worth more than gold. It is our Pacific way of life and thanks to this administration, it will be protected.