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Keep mine waste out of ponds: activists

By CBC News
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Environmentalists have launched a legal challenge to stop mining companies from putting mine waste into lakes and ponds.

Environmentalists in Ottawa and Newfoundland have launched a legal challenge to stop mining companies from putting mine waste into lakes and ponds.

Under the Canadian Fisheries Act, it's illegal to pollute a pond that has fish in it - but an amendment to the act allows a company to dump mine tailings into fish-bearing ponds as long there is an approved compensation plan.

In St. John's, the Sandy Pond Alliance filed a court action Friday seeking to have this amendment repealed.

"It's kind of a Third World developmental strategy, when you have to be making all these compromises to do developments," said alliance member Bill Montevecchi, a seabird researcher and Memorial University of Newfoundland professor.

"We're above that and we're beyond that. We don't need to be using Third World developmental strategies. We don't need to be destroying ecosystems to make money."

Montevecchi and his group say exempting companies from the federal Fisheries Act required a legislative change, so the regulations are illegal.

The act was amended in 2002 to allow companies to reuse dead lakes that had already being used for mining waste. Then in 2006, the amendment was used by the federal Conservative government to approve putting mine tailings into two healthy lakes in Newfoundland and Labrador that were reclassified as "tailings impoundment areas."

The federal government insists that winning such an exemption requires a rigorous process - companies are required to empty lakes and rivers of their aquatic life before putting tailings into them.

In Ottawa, the Council of Canadians also held a news conference, saying at least a dozen lakes across Canada are threatened by the amendment.

The Newfoundland and Labrador government showed no immediate sign of bowing to the concerns of environmentalists on the issue.

"Any kind of economic development has an impact on the environment - you leave a footprint," said provincial Natural Resources Minister Kathy Dunderdale.

"Mining is extremely important in Newfoundland and Labrador, in the country and in the world. We're certainly not at a place at this point in time where we're ready to move away from it."

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