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Palin's Hand Seen in Battle Over Mine in Alaska

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EKWOK, Alaska — Two years ago, [Sarah Palin](#) landed near this tiny native village and spoke of her love for the vast and starkly beautiful delta that drains into Bristol Bay.

“I am a commercial fisherman; my daughter’s name is Bristol,” said Ms. Palin, then a candidate for governor. “I could not support a project that risks one resource that we know is a given, and that is the world’s richest spawning grounds, over another resource.”

Many here took her words to heart. But as governor, Ms. Palin has helped ease the way for a proposed copper and gold mine of near-mythic proportions at the headwaters of Bristol Bay, the world’s greatest spawning ground for wild [salmon](#).

If state regulators give their approval, mining companies plan to carve an open pit that would rival the world’s largest mines, descending half a mile and taking as much energy to operate daily as the city of Anchorage. That prospect has ignited a war between Alaska’s two historic industries, mining and fishing.

Scientists and former state and federal biologists warn that toxic residue from the project, known as Pebble Mine, would irreparably harm a centuries-old salmon fishing industry that employs 17,000 and hauls in \$100 million annually.

Opposition is fierce and broad. Three former governors, two Republicans and a Democrat, have spoken out against the mine, as have Senator [Ted Stevens](#), a Republican; commercial fishing firms; and many Alaska Natives in Bristol Bay.

From the days of the 19th-century gold rush, mining has been encoded in Alaska’s DNA. And Pebble Mine, with the promise of 1,000 jobs in an economically depressed region, has a constituency.

Ms. Palin has remained officially neutral, saying that the state will evaluate the project when it receives a formal permit application. But she has embraced resource extraction in ways that are likely to help Pebble. On the presidential campaign trail in coal country this month, she led supporters in chants of “Mine, baby, mine!”

The governor appointed mining industry officials to lead her Department of Natural Resources, which regulates mines. And her environmental commissioner is a former

lawyer for Red Dog, which is Alaska's largest mine and has a history of violations of the Clean Water Act.

The revolving door spins both ways. Ken Taylor, a former fish and game official who was Ms. Palin's point man in her argument that [global warming](#) did not threaten polar bears, became environmental vice president for the Pebble Partnership in July.

In August, Alaskans defeated a "Clean Water" ballot measure aimed at preventing large mines like Pebble from releasing pollutants into salmon streams. Days before the vote, the Alaska Public Offices Commission found the Natural Resources Department's Web site had improperly featured material about the referendum that favored the mining industry. If there was any doubt where Ms. Palin stood, she dispelled it by speaking out against the measure.

Maria Comella, a spokeswoman for the McCain-Palin campaign, said the governor had taken a stand because mining is "vital to the existence of so many Alaskans for jobs, local economic growth and long-term stability."

Other moves by the Palin administration could also help Pebble. It plans to use a \$7 million federal earmark — a practice she criticizes on the campaign trail — for a major upgrade of a road through the snow-capped Chigmit range, records show. There are no villages along this route, but it would form the first leg of a proposed 200-mile thoroughfare between Pebble Mine and the Pacific Ocean.

"It's the road from nowhere to nowhere," said Geoffrey Parker, a land-use lawyer and Pebble critic.

The Palin administration declined to investigate ethics concerns raised by a Republican lawmaker who says mining officials have tried to buy the loyalty of native leaders, not least by paying \$25,000 per month to house workers in the homes of influential locals.

One of those houses is owned by Ethel and John Adcox, the parents of a close friend of [Todd Palin](#), the governor's husband. The Adcoxes say that the \$25,000 vastly exceeds the typical rate for their modest guesthouse in the tiny village of Iliamna.

"We just feel privileged to live here when this money is being spent and villages are not dying," said Ethel Adcox, a Yup'ik leader and distant relative of Mr. Palin.

Pebble is feeding her entire village — literally — with free steak and lobster dinners each Sunday, she said, adding, "It leaves a good taste in your mouth."

The lands around the Pebble site stretch to the horizon. Hundreds of grizzly bears sleep in its folds. The Mulchatna caribou herd tramps across the tundra. In the rivers that curl toward the Bering Sea, 40 million salmon come to spawn.

Beneath hills blanketed with a crazy quilt of moss and lichen, though, lurks a multibillion-dollar fortune in copper and gold, perhaps the greatest lode on the planet. The environmental challenges to mining there are formidable.

“It is one giant wetland, and no one really understands how it works,” said Carol Ann Woody, a biologist who served on the Pebble advisory team for the [United States Geological Survey](#) and views the mine as a threat.

Rain falls in torrents, winter temperatures hit 50 below and a geologic fault — capable of producing catastrophic earthquakes — sits 30 miles away. The proposed mine could produce seven billion tons of toxic waste rock; even traces of copper can disable a salmon’s ability to navigate.

Mine officials have said they may need to build earthen walls the size of the Hoover Dam to contain a lake of toxic residue that would have to be tended forever. “In the short or the long run, it will have a disastrous effect,” said Lance Trasky, who monitored the project until he retired as a senior supervisor with the Alaska Department of Fish and Game.

John Shively, chief executive of Pebble, disagreed, saying that with cutting-edge environmental technology, “it probably is possible to engineer something that is safe.” The question, he said, comes down to cost.

State officials have granted Pebble permission to conduct exploratory drilling but make no promises a mine will be permitted. Ms. Palin has said Alaska has the “right people in place” to evaluate Pebble’s plans.

Alaska regulators, however, have never rejected an application for a large mine, according to state officials. Scientists paid by Pebble are conducting geological and biological studies that the state will use to make its decision. The company also underwrites travel expenses and salaries of the state scientists who analyze those studies.

“Everyone Palin hears from comes from the mining industry” Mr. Trasky said.

The mine presents a complicated personal challenge for the governor. Her husband owns a fishing license in Bristol Bay, from which he derives a small income. He also is one-eighth Yup’ik and holds shares in a native corporation that has a service contract with Pebble.

Pebble money is everywhere in Bristol Bay. Bush pilots receive princely sums to fly workers to the mine. Pebble pays top dollar for cooks and young people who watch for bears around the mine site. It spends \$14 million annually on “community outreach.”

A former State Senate president, Rick Halford, a Republican with a home in the region, said “the mine is on a continuous mission to buy the body politic.”

A year ago, State Representative Jay Ramras, a Republican, wrote to Ms. Palin and her attorney general complaining that Pebble had flown native leaders to Anchorage for conferences and handed them envelopes with cash per diems, which the company later said amounted to \$200 each. Native officials, who could eventually vote on critical aspects of the mine, were benefiting from the project, Mr. Ramras added.

A deputy attorney general replied that he could not investigate “rumor or innuendo” and requested details, saying he would have the public safety commissioner evaluate the accusations.

Mr. Ramras obliged, but the information was never passed on. The governor’s spokeswoman, Sharon Leighow, said the deputy “looked at the information, saw there was no criminal activity and that’s where it stopped.”

Pebble officials say they are building good will through economic opportunity. “To say that giving a person a job is a bribe — I just don’t get that,” Mr. Shively said.

Kevin Jensen, a local village council member, took a job last year as a community liaison for Pebble Partnership, which he said could offset the hardship created by declining fish prices. “I’m not saying that the fish and water don’t need protecting,” he said. “But to say this is the only thing that is worth saving is ridiculous.”

When Lydia Olympic, council president of a nearby village, received a similar job offer, she saw it as a conflict and turned Pebble down. “I didn’t think about it,” she said. “I began to speak out against the mine.”

So did Luki Akelkok, a tough block of a man who drives a dog sled 80 miles across the frozen delta to a cabin near the mine site. He is the grand old man of Ekwok, a roadless Yup’ik village set along a salmon-rich river, and in April 2007, he led a petition drive to stop Pebble Mine.

He tapped deep roots of outrage. Many native people are cash poor but survive by hunting caribou and netting fish. His petitions resulted in last summer’s clean-water ballot measure.

Mining companies paid to fly Mr. Palin, who grew up near here and is an unofficial adviser to his wife, on a fact-finding tour of Alaska mines. The industry spent \$12 million fighting the referendum.

Then Ms. Palin spoke out against the measure. Her words immediately appeared in television commercials paid for by the mines, and the referendum failed.

In Ekwok last month, Mr. Akelkok chewed strips of cured salmon pulled from his smokehouse. Down by the Nushagak River, salmon nets hang in wood sheds, symbols of a timeless past.

On a nearby gravel runway sat a symbol of the future: a 10-seat Navajo propeller plane that ferries Pebble workers. A young Yup'ik man emerged from a stand of alders and climbed aboard.

Mr. Akelkok watched from his banged-up pickup truck with a “No Pebble” sticker on the door. He shook his head.

“Why did she have to say anything?” he asked. “Everyone is ticked off at Sarah.”



Stuart Isett for The New York Times

John Shively, left, and Gernot Wober of Pebble Partnership, which is doing exploratory drilling.



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Jonathan Hobson, left, and Eric Vanlandingham work on an exploratory drill at the proposed Pebble Mine.