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Editorial (New York Times)

Alaska Gets to Choose

Most of the big salmon fisheries in Europe, the Atlantic and the Pacific Northwest are gone, victims of commercial development, overfishing and pollution. Now one of the greatest remaining runs is at risk from a giant gold and copper mine that would dominate the headwaters of Alaska's Bristol Bay, an extraordinarily rich fishery that produces about half of the wild salmon sold in North America.

On Tuesday, Alaskans will vote on an initiative intended to strengthen protections for those headwaters — the intricate system of lakes, streams and rivers where the salmon spawn and live. It deserves their overwhelming approval.

The initiative will not, as opponents have claimed, block all mines in Alaska, or even this one, known as the Pebble Mine. It simply states that any new mine cannot put toxic wastes in salmon-bearing streams. This, in turn, will require mining companies to be meticulously careful when designing and operating a mine. Given the industry's history of environmental misrule, that can only be a good thing.

This has been a typical Alaskan struggle over natural resources, but more local than most. The debates over logging in the Tongass National Forest or drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge have involved federal lands, engaging Congress and the White House. This fight largely involves state lands, but that has not made it any less fierce. Each side has spent millions to advertise their competing economic claims.

The pro-mining forces — including many legislators and a consortium of Canadian and British companies — claim that the mine could yield more than \$300 billion in metals and hundreds of jobs for struggling rural Alaska. The pro-salmon forces say the mine could kill a fishing industry worth at least \$300 million a year — and that while metals are finite, the salmon are a renewable resource. But they will only be renewable if the waters they inhabit are kept free of toxins.

This country has failed to protect the salmon, and the salmon industry, in New England and in California, Oregon and Washington. Alaskans now have a chance to save one of the last healthy wild salmon populations left. We hope they vote yes for the initiative.