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Bristol Bay Tribes, Communities Once Again Urge EPA to Permanently Protect Bristol Bay This Year

Dillingham, Alaska — Bristol Bay residents and Tribes voiced widespread support for Clean Water Act protections during the Environmental Protection Agency’s public comment period that ends today (Sept. 6), joining a record number of Alaskans urging the federal agency to protect Bristol Bay this year.

In late May, EPA released its revised proposed determination outlining potential Clean Water Act 404(c) protections that would prohibit and restrict mine waste as proposed in Pebble’s 2020 mine plan and opened a public comment period on those proposed safeguards.

In response, more than 2,500 Bristol Bay residents from nearly every Bristol Bay community submitted comments to the EPA supporting comprehensive Clean Water Act protections that would fully protect the headwaters of Bristol Bay from the threat of Pebble Mine and other mines like it. During EPA hearings held in Dillingham and Iliamna at the beginning of the fishing season, more than 98 percent of the testimony also supported protections. Altogether, more than 30,000 Alaskans supported EPA protections during this comment period, more than any of the prior EPA comment periods. In total, half a million Americans supported protections for Bristol Bay, contributing to more than 4 million comments supporting Bristol Bay protections over the past decade.

“During the busiest season of the year, amidst a record-breaking salmon run, the people of Bristol Bay once again made it clear that EPA must finalize strong protections for our watershed and end the threat of Pebble Mine for good,” said UTBB Executive Director Alannah Hurley. “Year after year, in every comment period and hearing held, over 95 percent of all comments and testimony call on the EPA to protect the pristine waters of Bristol Bay. Waters that sustain our indigenous way of life, provide half the world’s sockeye salmon, and contribute thousands of sustainable jobs year after year. The science and record are clear, EPA must finalize strong protections for our headwaters by the end of this year.”

The Clean Water Act process has several steps remaining before protections could be finalized. EPA will now consider public input and determine whether to forward a “recommended determination,” to EPA headquarters. Then, EPA headquarters will decide to either withdraw the proposed protections or proceed with a “final determination” that would finalize and formally enact the protections for Bristol Bay. Bristol Bay Tribes, regional organizations and supporters

have urged the agency to finalize protections by the end of this year to end the decades-long threat for all those who depend on Bristol Bay's lands and waters.

Bristol Bay Tribes first requested Clean Water Act protections in 2010, prompting several years of scientific study that concluded when the EPA started considering proposed protections in 2014. Those were stalled in court, then withdrawn by the Trump Administration. After a victorious legal appeal by mine opponents, the process was reinstated in the fall of 2021. The Biden Administration now has the opportunity to finalize the urgently needed protections that would safeguard the watershed.

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United Tribes of Bristol Bay is a Tribal consortium representing 15 Bristol Bay tribal governments (that represent over 80 percent of the region's total population) working to protect the Yup'ik, Dena'ina, and Alutiiq way of life in Bristol Bay.