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## Climate Irony: Utah Ski Resort Owner Plans Giant Alaska Coal Mine

**SALT LAKE CITY, Utah**, August 18, 2009 (ENS) - The largest coal strip mine in Alaska history proposed by the owner of the Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort in Utah has aroused the concern of conservationists and skiers groups concerned about the mine's contribution to global warming.

Richard Bass, who owns the Utah resort, has partnered with William H. Hunt to form PacRim Coal LLC, which has submitted permit applications to build a giant coal mine that the groups say would not only raise the planet's temperature but also destroy 11 miles of prime salmon streams feeding the Cook Inlet.

"It's sadly ironic that the owner of a business that is solely dependent upon heavy snowfall and consistent winters is pushing a project that is a direct threat to the ski industry and completely contrary to the ideals of outdoor recreation," said Ryan Demmy Bidwell with the Ski Area Citizen's Coalition.

The coal mine on the Chuitna River, about 45 miles west of Anchorage, would be the third largest strip mine in the United States. PacRim Coal, a Delaware corporation backed by Texas investors, hopes to extract 300 million tons over 25 years.

Nearly all the coal excavated from the mine, would be exported to coal markets in China and other Pacific Rim countries. When burned, Chuitna River coal would emit more than 27 million tons of carbon dioxide, the

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**Chuitna River** (Photo by Damon Brook Kinitz courtesy [American Rivers](#))

groups calculate.

"Coal is the single largest source of global warming pollution on the planet. We're already seeing impacts on climate and weather patterns in the West. And this man wants to sell millions of tons of coal to China so it can be burned? Utah skiers and backcountry enthusiasts should be outraged," said Bidwell.

In addition to its contributions to global warming, the mine would destroy one of Alaska's most productive salmon fisheries.

This year, the Chuitna River was one of the few rivers in the Cook Inlet region where fisherman enjoyed a healthy king salmon run. But according to three scientific analyses of the mine's impacts released today, if it is built, salmon fisheries along the Chuitna River would suffer severe long-term damage and never fully recover.



**Late season king salmon caught on the Chuitna river weighed in at 50 pounds. October 2006.** (Photo by [Marc Theiler](#))

PacRim's reclamation plan is based on digging a "new stream" to replicate the physical appearance of the original. But Dr. Margaret Palmer, who analyzed the company's restoration plans, says there is no evidence that simply restoring the shape of a channel will

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bring back salmon runs, riparian corridors or other essential biological functions.

Past stream restoration projects involving channel modifications with much less damage have been unsuccessful, making PacRim's plans a grand experiment with a stream that produces a significant portion of Chuitna's salmon, said Dr. Palmer, professor and director of the Chesapeake Biological Laboratory, University of Maryland.

"There is no scientific evidence that wetlands or streams can be put back together to be living, healthy ecosystems after the kind of mining impacts described in the PacRim reports," said Palmer. "The science just isn't there. Experimentation should not be confused with sound, science-based knowledge."

"An extensive search of scientific literature, and discussions with stream restoration and in-stream flow experts did not yield a single documented example of strip-mined salmon habitat being successfully restored," writes Lance Trasky, retired habitat biologist, Alaska Department of Fish and Game, who authored another of the studies.

Professor Mark Wipfli, an expert on riverine ecology and food webs with the Institute of Arctic Biology, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, wrote in the third study, "Re-creating the complex three-dimensional diversity of interconnected underground sediments in salmon habitat, such as Middle Creek, would be impossible."



**Ski lift at Snowbird Resort, Utah** (Photo courtesy [Snowbird](#))

The conservationists and skiers groups say the mine proposal is a misstep for Bass, especially since Snowbird Resort has been an active participant in the National Ski Area Association's Sustainable Slopes program.

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Environmental initiatives of the program include reducing greenhouse gas emissions from resorts in order to protect the climate.

"Snowbird has been one of the leading ski areas in terms of addressing global warming," said Mark Clemens with the Utah Chapter of the Sierra Club. "In fact, they were the top award recipient from the NSAA in 2007. That's what makes this proposed coal mine by Mr. Bass so troubling."

In a statement Monday, Snowbird Ski and Summer Resort said, "We are proud of our nearly 40-year environmental record."

"Snowbird has helped lead the ski industry in environmental stewardship and undertaken award-winning efforts to clean up and preserve the local environment in and around Little Cottonwood Canyon. In 2007 we received the Golden Eagle Award for Overall Environmental Excellence for our precedent-setting mine cleanup project in American Fork Canyon," the resort said.

"Snowbird is one of owner Dick Bass's diverse business interests, each of which operates independently," the resort said. "It is not appropriate for Snowbird to comment on Mr. Bass's investments beyond those pertaining to our resort."

"We want to keep Utah cool and Alaska wild," said Dan Ritzman, the western director of the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal Campaign. "We aim to show that sparing the climate hundreds of millions of tons of CO2 pollution and protecting this fragile fishery are better long-term investments for local economies in Utah and Alaska. In today's transition to a greener economy, investments in coal are simply wasted dollars."

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