Editorial: Clark's best move: Speed up approvals for dozens of new mining projects

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A P&H 4100 loads a Terex 240 ton haul truck at one of Taseko Mines' expanded facilities.
Photograph by: Undated handout, Taseko Mines

Premier Christy Clark's pledge recently to accelerate approvals for mining projects is a rare ray of light in the gloom of economic stagnation.

With weak GDP growth, fiscal deficits, slumping stock markets, high household debt and a slight improvement in personal disposable income for much of the past decade, the prospect of eight new mines opening and another nine expanding by 2015 should prove a game-changer for British Columbia.

These projects are expected to create 1,800 new, well-paid jobs in communities where good jobs are hard to find. The average annual wage in mining last year was $108,100, income that will support families and local businesses and provide tax revenue for government to spend on what people say matters to them, namely health care and education. Besides jobs on and under the ground, mining supports auxiliary jobs in Vancouver and other urban centres where the financing, accounting, regulatory and legal work are done.

Mining contributed nearly $700 million in payments to governments last year; up from just over $400 million in 2009, as the industry experienced a resurgence after decades in the doldrums. In fact,

Copper Mountain was the first new copper mine to open since 1998 and it didn't happen overnight. It took four years to take Copper Mountain from the granting of drilling permits in 2007 to its opening in August of this year. And it's a brownfield mine, meaning it is situated on the site of a previous mine. Approvals for greenfield mines take much longer.

The mining projects Clark has in mind were not disclosed but the New Afton copper and gold mine near Kamloops, Mt. Mulligan, another copper-gold play near Prince George, and the Red Chris mine, an open-pit copper and gold mine in the northeast of the province, are likely on the list. A revised proposal for the Prosperity Mine near Williams Lake, previously approved by B.C. but rejected by former federal environment minister Jim Prentice, may also be fast-tracked.

But there's no reason for the Clark government to stop there. Twodozen proposals are under review by the B.C. Environment Assessment Office. If all get a green light, capital investment will top $11 billion. Mining occupies less than 0.3 per cent of B.C.'s land but it delivers more revenue per hectare than any other landbased activity. That is in contrast to 14 per cent of the land base that is either in parks or protected areas. Industry estimates, now several years old, determined that mining generates $150,000 per hectare of land disturbed, forestry $5,700, agriculture $1,400 and parks about $42 per hectare.

Clark and her team, Energy and Mines Minister Rich Coleman and Jobs Minister Pat Bell, will have to stay focused on their commitment to speed up the approvals process and make sure their message is broadcast throughout the bureaucracy. They also have to ensure the federal government is onside through effective lobbying and sharing the stage with Ottawa when the feds foot part of the bill.

Of course, the rapid expansion of mining projects and other industrial operations in remote and underserved regions of the province presents challenges as well as opportunity. For instance, BC Hydro will face increased demand for power but lacks the capacity to supply it. Fortunately, there is abundant natural gas in proximity to many of these projects that could be used to generate electricity. The Clark government must be prepared to greenlight cogeneration projects.

If Premier Clark can stick to her guns and help bring these projects into production on the schedule she has set out, B.C.'s mining industry will enjoy a renaissance that will bring benefits to all British Columbians.

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