

Covering open-pit scars raises hope for Tsolum's resurrection

BLACK CREEK - When Father Charles Brandt tackles a job, the safest wager in the world is to bet the job will be done.

The multi-talented "hermit priest" of the Comox Valley has been leading a fight to bring the once productive but now dead Tsolum River back to life. There still is some battling to do but it would appear the conservationists, sparked by the efforts of Brandt, are winning the fight.

Open-pit mining allowed on nearby Mt. Washington was responsible for the killing of the Tsolum. Copper leaching from the operation entered the Tsolum watershed and then into the Puntledge to wipe out steelhead, trout and salmon runs.

Mining has ended but the damage continues because the open-pit scars still send copper leachate into the water systems.

Brandt, the Comox Valley chapters of the Steelhead Society of B.C. and the Wildlife Federation, and other conservationists finally persuaded the provincial government to take action. In March, 1987, B.C. Cabinet approved a two-stage operation to minimize

the pollution of the Tsolum River watershed.

The first stage was completed last September. A giant, million-dollar "raincoat" was placed over a portion of the abandoned Mt. Washington copper mine. The "raincoat" of till (a mixture of sand, gravel and clay) was to stop the flow of leachates entering the Tsolum.

Brandt is hopeful the ambitious two-year project, admittedly "partly experimental," will work.

The Mt. Washington project has attracted interest from other parts of the world. Already scientists and technicians from Australia, San Francisco, Montreal, Saskatchewan and elsewhere have visited the site.

If the first stage does not prove effective, then the government will follow up with the second stage — applying a \$1.2 million plastic membrane over waste rock.

"After the first stage was completed," Brandt says, "scientists and biologists were looking for diminished copper levels in the Tsolum after the October-November rains.



ERNE FEDORUK

On fishing

Careful monitoring took place during this critical period. It was found that there was no decrease in copper levels.

"This, of course, has led to speculation that the first-stage treatment was not succeeding. Groups hoping to introduce salmonid fry or smolts into the Tsolum watershed this spring to enhance the decimated runs are somewhat confused as to what course to take. They will, of course, take direction from both provincial and federal biologists."

Observers feel it is possible some of copper-containing overburden has not been

covered with fill, and may be responsible for the unabated levels of copper entering the watershed.

In a letter to Jack Davis, the provincial Mines Minister, Brandt asked if the government will take action to see if the situation is corrected.

Brandt also asked Davis for assurance that the cleanup of Mt. Washington will be carried through to completion.

Davis replied: "I want to reassure you that I am committed to resolving the acid rock drainage and related copper leaching problems ... and I know that this commitment is shared by my cabinet colleagues."

"Specifically, we intend to utilize the 1990 field season to monitor the effectiveness of the till cover ... and to use the results gained to plan further work on the site as necessary."

While the till blanket has improved conditions at the mine site, it is becoming clear that this will not be a complete answer to the downstream water quality and fish impact problems. Remaining in-pit wastes are

definitely contributing to the copper loadings through a complex groundwater flow.

"While last fall's copper readings were high, and a definite source of concern, it is not yet clear how much this may have been due to the construction disturbance itself. Some water quality and hydrology monitoring programs are now in place, and others are in the planning stages to address these uncertainties," says Davis.

Davis said additional work, pilot testing, alternatives and other restoration work will continue.

In closing, the minister said: "I wish to reaffirm my intention to see the Mt. Washington mine site fully rehabilitated."

That's what Brandt and the area's other conservationists have been after.

Brandt's style isn't a high-profile one, but it is effective. Hard work, perseverance and intelligent reasoning will do the job as effectively as any high-powered lobby group.

When the fish return to the Tsolum, the major credit will have to go to Fr. Brandt.