

Dozers returning to slopes to finish-salmon-saving job in streams below mountain

By Les Leyne
Legislature staff

Bulldozers will return to a central Vancouver Island mountain slope next week to complete an experimental project aimed at saving salmon fry in the streams far below.

The energy ministry has signed a \$310,475 contract with a Campbell River construction firm for a second summer of excavating on Mount Washington, at the site of an abandoned copper mine.

The work, to be undertaken by Gretzinger and MacDonald Ltd., is an attempt to stem the flow of poisonous leachate from the old mine's waste dump into the Tsolum River, near Courtenay.

Murray Galbraith, mines inspector with the energy ministry, said thousands of yards of glacial till and limestone are being mixed and contoured to cap a dump that covers about eight hectares on a slope of Mount Washington.

The sulphides in the ore dump react with oxygen and water to produce sulphuric acid which, in turn, seeps into the ore and leaches copper and other metals into the watercourse.

The Tsolum River has suffered for years from the waste trickling into its watershed, but the problem was only discovered recently.

Father Charles Brandt, chairman of the Tsolum River Enhancement Society, said the mine was abandoned in 1967, when there was no law governing reclamation.

Salmon stocks declined on the Tsolum for 20 years, but in 1984 the low point was reached. A hatchery on a creek running into the river released 2.5 million salmon fry. The experts expected a bountiful return, but next to none came back.

Water sampling uncovered the full extent of the problem. Brandt said where other creeks have readings of up to five micrograms of copper per litre, the Tsolum averages between 60 and 80 micrograms. Sky-high measurements have been taken further up the river, closer to the mine, which is about five kilometres from the ski area.

The mining company had been defunct for years, so the government assumed responsibility for cleaning up the mess, and a few others like it left before passage of reclamation legislation.

"The project is setting a precedent in Canada," said Brandt.

The work started last summer, but a late start and early fall rains forced the equipment off the mountain. A bit less than half the project was completed. The limestone is brought in from Texada Island, midway across Georgia Strait, and is used to neutralize the acid runoff.

Because the project is relatively untested, there are differences of opinion on whether it will work.

The man who holds the mineral rights to the area doesn't think so.

Clifford Rennie, of Better Resources Ltd., holds legitimate gold and silver rights to 12,000 hectares in the area, including the dumps that are being disturbed.

Rennie has advocated another approach he said would be cheaper and just as efficient — drilling holes into the dumps and flooding them with a slurry of ground limestone, which would neutralize the sulphides.

He said a ditch dug last year to drain water around the dump didn't collect any water.

"It isn't working yet, they haven't reduced the flow from under the dump.

"I feel it was bulldozed ahead on a political basis. There was a great hue and cry about Strathcona about that time, and they had to appear to be doing something.

"I can appreciate their efforts, but they're spending taxpayers' money up there."

Last summer's work, done by a different company, cost about \$400,000 and with associated engineering costs, the total bill for the experiment will probably run up to \$1 million.

Assistant deputy minister Bruce McRae said there won't be any improvement until the job is completely finished.

"It's an all-or-nothing project.

"We think it will work. It'll take three years to find out."

McRae said the branch had discussed Rennie's idea, but based on the best advice available, opted to go with the current project. Brandt said he didn't take Rennie's idea seriously, pointing out the mineral rights gave him a vested interest in the dump.

"They probably went to work too soon; without careful analysis they didn't discover all the seeps. But I'm grateful they're doing it, and I think it'll be successful in the long run."