

Geologist sees economic benefits in mine clean-up

By Andrew Findlay
Echo Staff

Solutions to acid drainage pollution from shut mines can cost millions. But with at least \$1 million in lost fish potential annually on the Tsolum River, investing in clean-up could be a cash cow for the province, says a federal government scientist.

Rob McCandless, a geologist with Environment Canada, has been participating in a series of Tsolum River Task Group meetings.

His "big ticket" solution for the Mt. Washington Mine is to build a pipe to carry acid rock drainage from the mine down to the valley for lime treatment in a plant. It's a costly venture but one with potentially enormous benefits.

"That's the silver bullet - a \$3 million plant. With \$1 million lost in fish every year we've got a pay-back in three years. That's good economics," said McCandless.

Environment Canada has spent \$47,000 studying Tsolum River water quality and options for treatment.

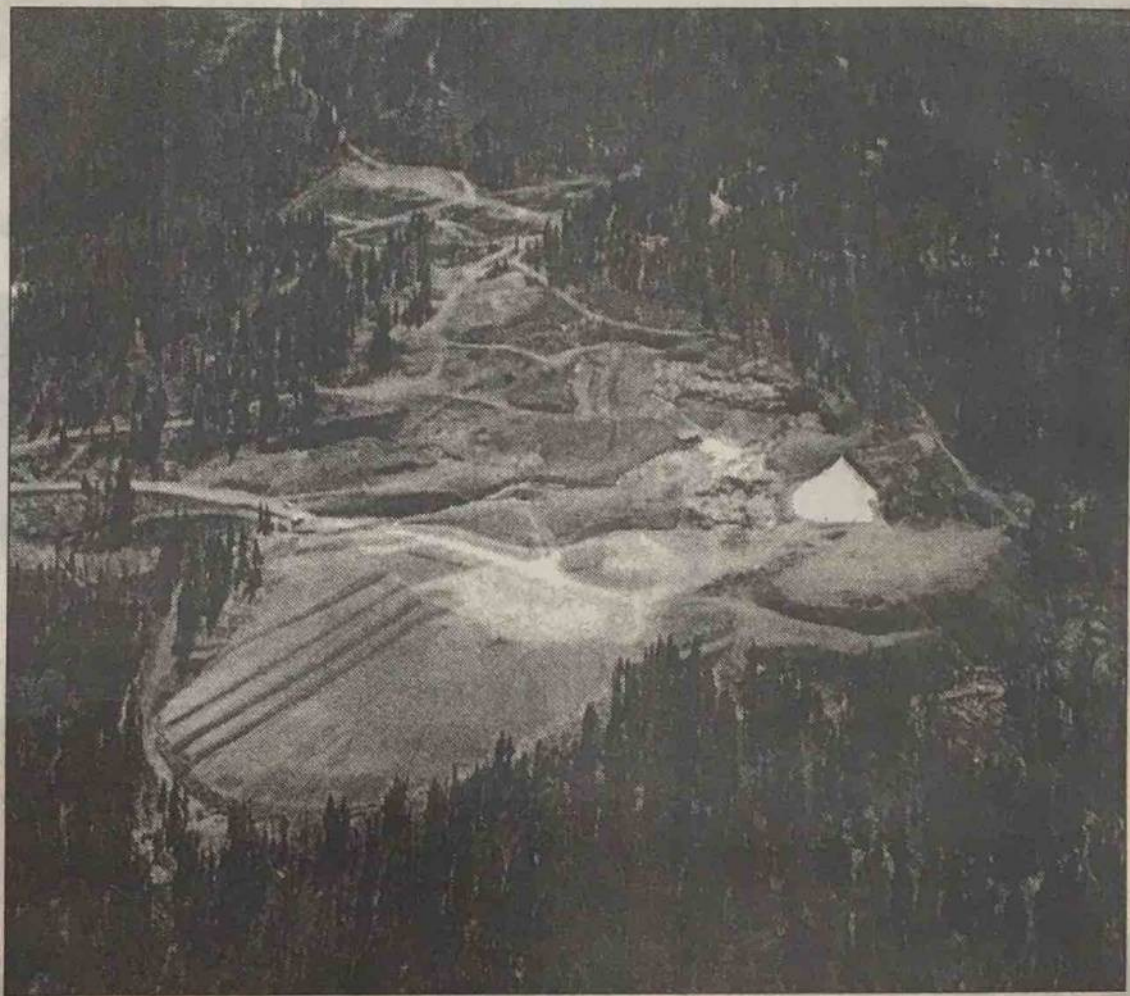
A cheaper option, and one more attractive for those with hands on government purse strings, is directing drainage to wetlands and treating the contaminants with hay, woodchips and limestone.

The approach has been used with some success in the Eastern United States and would cost approximately \$1.2 million if employed at Mt. Washington.

However, both the wetland and treatment plant options would require on-site reclamation of the mine, which would involve filling with gravel and seeding with native plants and grasses.

McCandless still favors the treatment plant option as a more thorough, albeit expensive, cure for the Tsolum River woes.

But herein lies the problem. Government funds are getting more scarce every day but the list of projects on which to spend grows longer.



Acid drainage from abandoned Mt. Washington copper mine has devastated Tsolum River

Still McCandless sees Mt. Washington as an "excellent" investment. He would like to see B.C. Environment commit funds to the project, though he admits the federal counterpart, Environment Canada, is not in the position to throw millions of dollars at Mt. Washington.

DFO has committed nearly \$500,000 to the Tsolum but it's targeted mostly for downstream efforts to control the seal problem.

McCandless believes tackling the source of the problem on the slopes of Mt. Washington will require a major commitment from Victoria.

"It's really a matter of getting this on a cabinet table," said McCandless.

Charles Brandt is no stranger to the Tsolum River saga. He is unhappy that the provincial government has yet to make a financial commitment to the project.

Victoria announced a decision Wednesday to put \$22.7 million towards habitat protection and fisheries

development. Brandt hopes the Tsolum task group can get their hands on a piece of the pie to kickstart reclamation work at Mt. Washington.

"I think I'm really disappointed that we're not farther along. We've got a task force in place and ready to go," said Brandt.