

# Gov't team probes Tsolum pollution

By FRANCES BULA

A standing government committee on mine reclamation will complete a report in the next two weeks on the effects of copper pollution in the Tsolum River.

After that, the environment ministry will decide what will be done about a possible clean-up of the abandoned copper mine that is leaching metal into the river.

Tom Oxland, the Vancouver Island director in the environment ministry, said that the team of experts will collect more data in the next two weeks to add to their observations from a visit made to Mt. Washington and the

Tsolum River two weeks ago.

But "there is no question that there are high-metal contents in the Murex and the Tsolum," Oxland said.

Water runs across the overburden from the copper mine into a creek that leads to the Murex, a tributary of the Tsolum.

The team will present a report to assistant deputy environment minister Earl Anthony, that will "identify options," Oxland said.

Reclamation of the site may be one option, but that is not definite yet, he said.

"There's a fair amount of stuff. It would be a major undertaking and it's too early to tell how much

it would cost," Oxland said.

The overburden covers about 60 acres on the northern slope of Mt. Washington.

Fisheries and waste management workers first began keeping data on high copper levels in the Tsolum River about three years ago. The river has had declining pink runs for the last two decades and hatchery efforts have been markedly unsuccessful.

A team of eight senior experts from several federal and provincial ministries visited Mt. Washington two weeks ago to investigate the abandoned copper mine.

The high-powered interest in Tsolum River pollution is largely the result of work by the local Steelhead Society. Rev. Charles Brandt, chairman of the committee to rehabilitate the Tsolum River, has bombarded federal and provincial ministries with letters for the past four months.

As a result, Comox MLA Karen Sanford questioned Environment Minister

Austin Pelton about Tsolum River contamination May 10, pressuring him to act on the problem.

Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources Minister Stephen Rogers wrote Brandt recently to say that "I share your concerns that effluent may be affecting fish stocks" and that his staff will work with the environment ministry to "develop an appropriate strategy for controlling the problem."

Brandt has also been contacted by the director of the federal environmental-protection branch, M. Ito, who wrote that "while I have no illusions about the difficulties we must overcome in addressing the problems at Mt. Washington, I can assure you we are prepared to pursue all possible avenues."

Premier Bill Bennett and opposition leader Bob Skelly are also being kept informed of investigations and action at the Mt. Washington mine site.

A solution to the problem could be difficult.

Brandt discovered, when he visited the old mine site

for the first time three weeks ago, that the tailings pond alone covers about 30-40 acres on the Mt. Washington slope.

"It would take millions to fix it," members of the investigating team said.

There are also huge piles of overburden still sitting on the mountainside.

Another major obstacle is the lack of any legislation to force the company that abandoned it to do a

clean-up.

Mine-reclamation legislation was passed only in 1969, after the Mt. Washington copper mine had shut its doors. Although mines are no longer allowed to abandon their sites without reclamation projects, the legislation is not retroactive.