

Grant a step toward revival of Tsolum River

THE ISSUE AT A GLANCE

- The Tsolum River originates on Mount Washington and runs through the Comox Valley to Courtenay. The river historically supported large populations of salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout.
- The local economic benefit of the resulting fishery was estimated in 1995 dollars to be in excess of \$2 million.
- An open pit copper mine operated on Mount Washington from 1964 to 1967 prior to going bankrupt.
- In 1986, Environmental Impact Assessment work carried out by the province found that copper leaching from the abandoned mine had virtually eliminated the fisheries resource in the entire Tsolum River watershed.
- In 2003, a six-way partnership led to a

wetland project, which has reduced the copper levels in the Tsolum River to the point that fish stocks are returning to the river.

- Approximately \$80,000 is required to fund an engineering study to determine an appropriate remediation plan, and to estimate costs.
- The present landowner is Timber West, while the base mineral rights are held by Fording Coal and the precious metal rights by Better Resources Ltd.
- The Mining Association of B.C. also has recently come on board and will provide technical and financial support to the remediation project.

Source: BC Ministry of Environment

BY CAROLYN HEIMAN
Tunes Colonist staff

For more than four decades, a scored, six-city-block size chunk of land on the north slope of Mount Washington has quietly oozed fish-killing Copper acid into the Tsolum River, once home to 200,000 pink salmon and coveted steelhead.

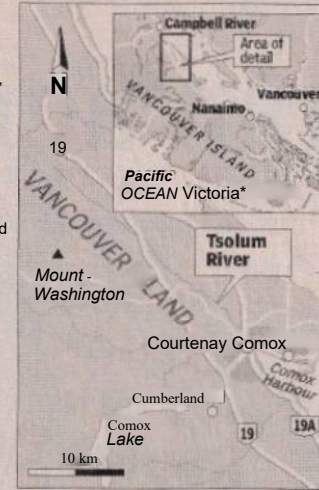
Conservationists, who have struggled for more than 25 years to bring the tainted river back to life, cheered a small turning point Saturday when the B.C. government announced \$50,000 toward a design for a "Band-Aid" atop an abandoned mine site.

For 84-year-old Charles Brandt, a hermit and ordained priest who has lived a large part of his life along the river and dedicated thousands of hours to drawing attention to the river's plight, the funding is a significant step toward a lifetime dream.

"We've met with various ministers in the past," said Brandt, who has won prestigious environmental awards for his efforts on behalf of the river.

"They always ask us if we have a plan for the mine site," a project for which conservation groups have never had funds.

With the \$50,000, along with a further \$15,000 from other agencies and donors, six conservation partners will work with



the Mining Association of B.C. to create a plan for the site that has languished since the late 1960s.

The project manager will be the Pacific Salmon Foundation. The B.C. Ministry of the Environment, landowner Timber West, the Tsolum River Restoration Society, Environment Canada and Fisheries and Oceans Canada are the other conservation partners.

The foundation will use the money to get an engineer-designed "cap" on the 18-hectare mine site. It would seal off the means for copper to enter into the slowly reviving but fragile Tsolum River. The design, hoped to be done by December, is the first step to installing the engineered cover, estimated to cost \$3.5 million to \$10 million.

The government money awarded Saturday may seem small in contrast to the scope of the project. But Jack Minard,

Tsolum River Restoration Society co-ordinator, said given that they've been trying to get attention for the river for 20 or 30 years, "this is a turning point for us that a minister will give us some money."

The story of the Tsolum reached a crisis in the mid-1980s, when area residents and conservationists realized the river was slowly dying, if not already dead.

Brandt — the first Catholic-ordained hermit on Vancouver Island — said that when he first moved to his hermitage in 1965, "we didn't really know it was happening."

But the slow death of the river started to reveal itself. "It was a sad thing."

From a high of 200,000 pinks returning in the 1940s, less than a decade later only 15,000 returned to their natural habitat. By 1984, there were no fish in the river and it was apparent there was something terribly wrong. Tests showed copper levels so high that fish couldn't hope to live in it.

"We didn't see insects, crawfish or anything living in the river anymore," Minard said.

Between 1988 and 1991, an earthen cap on top of the most exposed part of the mine was created, but it took nearly 10 years to be effective and reduced copper levels by only 50 per cent. That was not enough for fish to survive.

In 2003, a tributary of the river was rerouted over a stretch of wetland that filtered out copper and in turn reduced the toxicity in the Tsolum River.

"As soon as we put that in place, our water quality immediately improved. We did tests with coho in traps. They all survived for the first time there was almost dancing in the streets, we were so happy," Minard said.

"It was a really good news story. Approximately 10,000 pinks were returning. And there were huge clouds of bugs like we've never seen before."

But the wetland project provides only a temporary solution until the real problem — the mine — is solved, said Minard, adding that the effectiveness of the wetland rerouting is projected to end in five years. In effect, it is drying up, after which it "won't function as a biofilter."

Minard said given the expiring effectiveness of the wetland project, and the decade it will take for the cap on the mine site to become effective, there is a small window of time open for work to start on capping the mine. "We hope work will start by June 2007."

Minard said it has been a long journey, but he is "on a personal road to one day fishing for steelhead out of the Tsolum."

"I used to live to fish, but I haven't fished for 15 years."