

# Mine gets clean up

By **RUSS PARADICE**  
Islander News Services

The idea of powerwashing the floor of an open pit mine would have seemed borderline ridiculous only 10 years ago.

And yet that's part of the work the provincial government has resorted to in recent weeks near Campbell River, in its continuing quest to find a way to stop a deadly flow of copper leachates from streaming out of an abandoned Mt. Washington Copper mine into the Tsolum River between here and Courtenay.

The copper pollution has decimated the Tsolum's once-bountiful fish runs.

"The fact we're washing down a small section of the pit floor shows how thorough you have to be when you're dealing with the problem of acid mine drainage," says Murray Galbraith, an official with the provincial Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources who has been working on the Mount Washington problem for three years.

Hopes for an overnight fix to the mountain's acid mine drainage problem, if they ever really existed, have faded now as the true complexity of the problem has become readily apparent.

Officials won't know until sometime this fall if the test work

conducted on the site this summer offers a "viable proposition" for solving the problem, says Galbraith, a reclamation engineer with the ministry's engineering and inspection branch.

If the test work is successful, then the ministry will have to decide how to best expand that work next summer, Galbraith says.

Oyster River resident Father Charles Brandt, who first started lobbying Victoria back in the early 1980s to save the Tsolum, is satisfied the provincial government is committed to solving the acid mine drainage problem.

"I'm convinced that they are going to carry through," says Brandt, who recently met with Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources Minister Jack Davis, during the Socred cabinet's visit to the Comox Valley.

But Brandt interjects a cautionary note for those who think man can fully restore the Tsolum's eco-system.

"I'm hopeful that one day we'll once again have pretty good runs of salmon on the Tsolum. But I don't think we'll ever be able to completely restore the Tsolum," he said.

"Once the bio-diversity of a whole watershed or a river disappears, it can never be recaptured. It can never, never be the

same."

The roots of the Mt. Washington problem date back to 1964 when the ill-starred Mt. Washington Mining Co. Ltd. was formed. The company commenced its open pit copper-mining operation that year, on a slope about five kilometers from where the Mt. Washington ski area is now located. The company fell into receivership in April 1967 and all operations ceased.

The legacy left behind by the mine was acid drainage, the mining industry's number one environmental problem.

The acid mine drainage at Mt. Washington is coming from waste rock left at the site. During the mine's lifetime, about 1.03 million tonnes of waste rock and overburden were produced. This waste rock was put into two main dumps beside the shallow open pit. Acid mine drainage is occurring in one of these two dumps.

Acid drainage occurs when water and oxygen in the air combine together and come in contact with the sulphide compounds that are present in certain types of rock. This naturally-occurring phenomenon is intensified when these rocks are broken or crushed, as is the case with the waste rock.

The acid produced in turn leaches (or frees) the copper and other metals in the rock. This copper is seeping into Pyrrhotite Creek and on into other water courses before eventually entering into the Tsolum.

Over the course of two summers, 1988 and 1989, the piles of waste rock around the pit were collected and put on the dumps. The dump thought to be causing the problem was sloped and covered by a one-meter thick blanket of glacial till, which officials dubbed a "giant raincoat."

See **NEW**, page 15A