

# Mystery oil spill source sought

## Leaking oil getting into Courtenay R.

By **RUSS PARADICE**

The Courtenay River is being fouled a tiny amount every week by a "perpetual oil spill" that apparently originates from a leaking furnace oil tank buried somewhere in the downtown area.

"It (leak) is probably not responsible for any specific fish kills, but it certainly is adding to the general degradation of the Courtenay River," Bryan Allen, a community advisor for the local federal fisheries department office, said Tuesday.

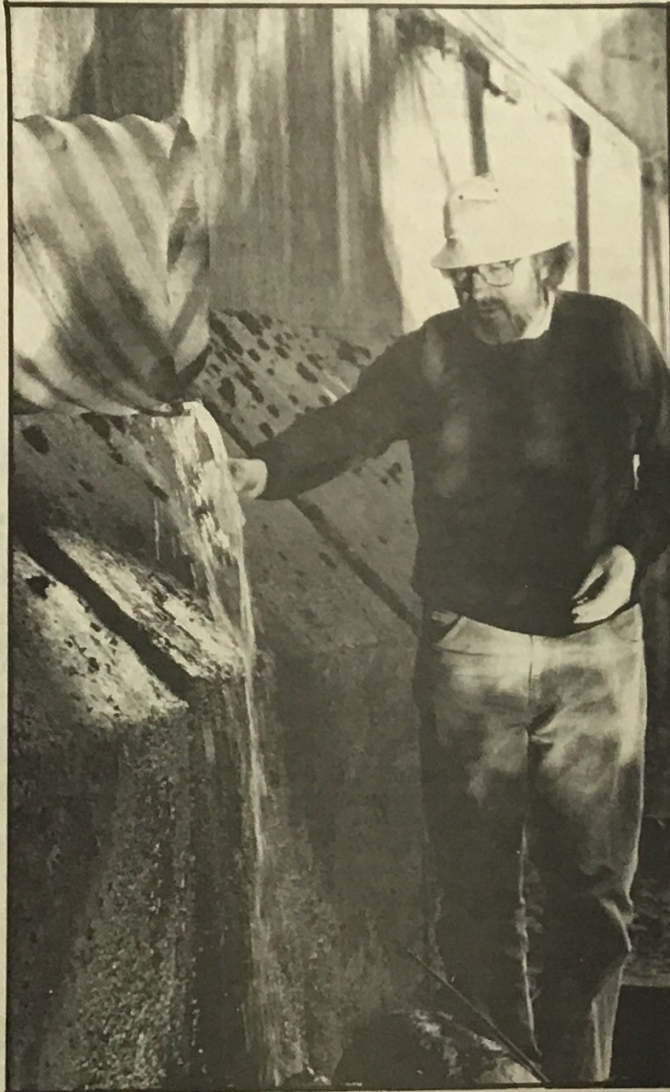
Stan Janzen, public works superintendent for the City of Courtenay, said Thursday city crews have been stymied so far in their efforts to track down the source of the "very light" oil.

"It's been very frustrating for us," he said. "We just don't where the heck it's coming from."

What is known is that the oil is entering the river via a municipal storm water outfall located on the west bank of the river just a few yards north of the Fifth Street Bridge. Several local environmentalists, including Allan Brooks and Ruth Masters, alerted fisheries officials earlier this year to the problem, dubbed a "perpetual oil spill" by one man who lives on the river.

Gordie McEachen, who is the fisheries officer in charge of the Comox sub-district, said Thursday only a very small amount of oil is entering the river. "It's very light and very small."

Father Charles Brandt, a Black Creek resident with a keen interest in preserving the area's rivers, took a Free Press reporter to the outfall last Friday morning



**Father Brandt: oil coming from this storm outfall**

during low tide. Water coming out of the pipe had an oily sheen to it and a tell-tale gasoline rainbow was clearly visible on the rocks directly below the spout.

From a layman's perspective,

the amount of oil entering the water at any one moment appeared to be miniscule.

Brandt took several samples of the water last Friday with the intent of having them assayed in

a lab. "That way we'll know exactly what's in it."

He said he plans to give one sample to the local fisheries office, another to the Puntledge River fish hatchery and a third to a friend who wants to submit it as a private citizen to the provincial government for lab testing.

Although the fisheries office hasn't taken any samples of the water yet, Allen said it's "pretty clear" the pollutant is either diesel or stove oil.

Janzen said he sent a sample to a Vancouver lab earlier this year. Unfortunately, it was unable to assay the sample because the oil is so thin.

Whatever is in the water, Brandt said he personally believes it would be "unpardonable" to allow the pollutant to

continue flowing into the river.

Allen said the suspected underground tank could be buried under a commercial building, a residence or an abandoned gas station. "It (oil) could be entering into the city's storm water system from practically anywhere."

Allen said officials conducting the search may have to go so far as to analyse all fuel delivery records for residents and companies in the downtown area. Explaining the logic of this, Allen said if someone's oil tank was leaking they would almost certainly be experiencing a dramatic rise in their fuel consumption.

Janzen noted that city crews have been able to track down about six similar spills this year, all originated from leaking fuel tanks.

Although only a very small amount of the oily substance is entering the water at any given time, Brooks is worried about the "cumulative" effect of the discharge on the river.

Brooks, who is a retired biologist, is head of the Comox-Strathcona Natural History Society. Brooks said he raised the issue at the society's last meeting and urged group members to go have a look at it.

Acting as an individual, Brooks said he recently reported the matter to the local fisheries office and Courtenay city hall.

Allen said Masters, probably the area's best-known environmentalist, has also contacted his office about the matter.