

# Island priest fights coal mine

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Staff Reporter

CAMPBELL RIVER — An angry priest is out to save the salmon of Oyster River.

Rev. Charles A.E. Brandt says months of work by local volunteers and a lot of taxpayers' money will go for nothing if coal mining plans for the nearby Oyster watershed aren't stopped.

"Many of us have worked long and hard to bring back salmon runs that were almost wiped out by logging operations years ago," the Roman Catholic priest said.

"Now the acid generated by coal mining could mean the death of everything we've done."

A Victoria-based company, Nuspar Resources Ltd., has been given permission to test-mine 300 tons of coal from a site on Woodhus Creek, a major tributary of the Oyster.

The company claims to have spent \$20 million on exploration and testing. It plans an underground mine that would employ as many as 300 people. Environmentalists say this could cause the river system to become toxic to fish.

Brandt, who spearheads the Oyster River Enhancement Society, says the non-profit organization worked with federal fisheries experts on a program that now has the capacity to produce about 3.3 million young salmon annually for the river system. He says this represents 3,140 worker-days of labor and about \$117,000 in materials and services.

Now, in an open letter to B.C. Mines Minister Jack Davis, Brandt asks: "Do you consider worthwhile the thousands of hours of volunteer effort exerted toward enhancing the salmonid stocks and the ongoing attempt to rehabilitate the Oyster River system?"

"If so, Mr. Davis, why do you then allow a company like Nuspar to threaten and possibly destroy all that we are working for?"

Provincial fisheries figures show estimated annual runs of 105,000 pink salmon in the Oyster in the 1950s, compared with a mere 200 pinks last year. Other salmon species have also declined.

Brandt says this was caused by widespread clear-cut logging in the watershed, which allowed silt and topsoil to wash into the water and smother salmon eggs before they could hatch.

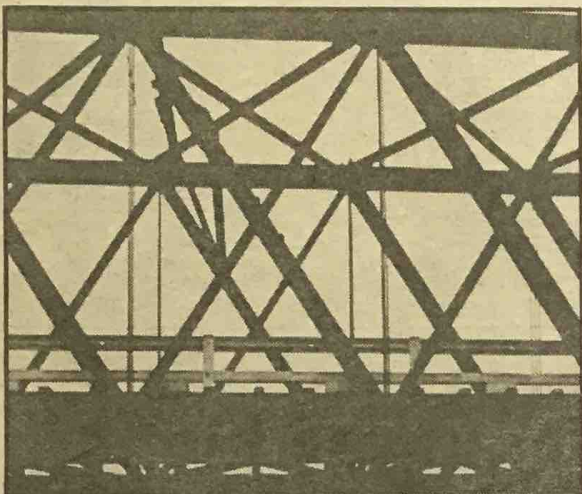
However, experts believe the runs can be revitalized — unless a new threat to water quality comes along.

Nuspar president Buzz Sawyer

says his company has made extensive tests indicating a mine would cause no pollution. Brandt "refuses to believe us," he complains.

"As far as the experts tell us, there are no problems," Sawyer told The Province. "We will continue this year to the point of making our Stage 1 submission for development, which will be reviewed by assorted ministries, provincial and federal."

Davis is holidaying. A mines ministry spokesman said opponents of the proposed mine will get a chance to state their views.



Province photo by Grant Patterson

Rev. Brandt says proposed mine could poison river.