

Mine tied to salmon decline

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COURTENAY — Federal and provincial environment officials are investigating charges that an abandoned open-pit copper mine on nearby Mount Washington is the cause of pollution affecting salmon runs on the Tsolum River.

The river, which runs through the Comox Valley, has had steadily declining pink salmon runs for 20 years. A hatchery enhancement program has failed to increase the number of salmon returning to spawn.

An eight-man team of government experts on mine reclamation paid its first visit to the mine this week, said Tom Oxland, Vancouver Island director of the environment ministry.

Oxland, a member of the team, acknowledged it is investigating the old mine in part because of pressure from the Courtenay Steelhead Society.

He said the team found that water runs directly from the mine's overburden (waste rock covering the ore), which is spread across the northern slope of Mount Washington, to Murex Creek, which flows into the Tsolum River.

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

He said copper has been found in concentrations as high as 20,000 parts per million parts of water in the Murex. The accepted maximum in copper runoff from nearby Westmin Mines' settling pond has been established at .06 parts per million.

Oxland said further tests must be done and there is no proof yet that pollution is the only cause of declining salmon runs.

But Bill McLean, a federal fisheries biologist who has done extensive

water sampling in the river, said the high levels of copper are likely having a significant effect on the river's salmon.

But a clean-up would be a "major undertaking," Oxland said. The overburden covers about 24 hectares and is 15 metres high in places.

The investigating team of federal and provincial biologists and technicians will assess the problem during the next two weeks. It will then present a report to assistant deputy environment minister Earl Anthony.

After that it is up to Victoria to decide what action will be taken, the team members said.

B.C. Energy Minister Stephen Rogers has already told the Courtenay Steelhead Society he will ask his staff to develop "an appropriate strategy for dealing with the problem," society member Rev. Charles Brande said.