

More work set on copper leak

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By **RUSS PARADICE**

The Mt. Washington mine reclamation project has so far failed to produce any improvement in copper pollution levels in the Tsolum River, Father Charles Brandt says.

"Unfortunately, the levels are not any lower," Brandt said Wednesday.

However, Brandt said he's learned that additional work will be conducted at the site starting later this month in hopes of rectifying the problem.

The provincial Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources is the lead ministry in the project, which has so far cost in the neighborhood of \$1 million.

Brandt, who first began lobbying Victoria to look into the problem back in 1984, has been keenly following the project's progress in his role as the chairman of the Tsolum River enhancement committee. It falls under the umbrella of the Comox Valley chapter of the Steelhead Society of B.C.

Fish runs on the Tsolum have been seriously impacted due to the copper pollution, which is coming from an abandoned open pit copper mine located on a slope about five kilometres from the Mt. Washington ski area. The mine ceased operations in 1967.

During its short lifetime, the mine produced about 1.03 million tonnes of waste rock and overburden. This material was mainly put into two areas, known as the north and south dumps. Tests have shown only the north dump, located just downhill from the pit, is causing any problems.

The environmental villain in this case is a naturally-occurring process known as acid mine drainage. This acid -- produced when oxygen and water combine together and come in contact with the sulphide compounds present in certain types of rock -- has the effect of freeing the copper and other metals present in the rock. This deadly flow of leachates eventually finds its way into the Tsolum system.

Over the course of two years, the province paid for a huge cover of glacial till to be put over the north dump in hopes that this would prevent the acid mine drainage process from occurring in the first place.

But for some reason copper levels have not gone down.

Brandt recently received new information on the project from federal officials connected to it.

According to Brandt, officials theorize that acid mine drainage may be occurring in the waste rock still lying on the pit floor. As a result, the province is going to scrape this waste rock off the pit floor, put it into a huge pile and then cover it.

Brandt said there is about 30,000 cubic metres of overburden on the pit floor -- about one-fifth the amount covered over in the north dump.

Brandt said he's been told the new work should take about three weeks.

If this work doesn't resolve the problem, the province has previously indicated that it will try other means of tackling the problem, including the possibility of putting a plastic membrane over the north dump.