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Old copper mine site to be restored

By **QUENTIN DODD**
Courier-Islander reporter

The provincial cabinet has approved a sizeable restoration program for the acid-generating Mount Washington Copper Mine site abandoned in the 1960s.

The government will spend an estimated \$600,000 on trucking hundreds of tons of clay till to the site this spring.

The material will be used to try to seal a leaching waste rock dump, which has been blamed with washing copper into fish-bearing waters downstream.

The clay till is to be compacted in a bid to prevent the vital in-

gredients of air and water getting into the waste material. The site will then be monitored for up to three years to see whether acid runoff continues.

The government is also to test for the amount of copper being released downstream into Pyrrhotite Creek, a tributary of Murex Creek. Murex flows into the Tsolum River, which the area's Steelhead Society has labelled as "dead." The Tsolum empties into the Puntledge River, which carries a major salmon hatchery.

If the initial work — which also includes new ditches to divert water from the site — is found to have been effective, top soil will

be added to the till. Vegetation will then be planted.

If the work is ineffective, the site will be covered with an impermeable synthetic membrane and given an additional coating of till before being covered with top soil and planted.

Cost of stage one and the addition of topsoil and planting is estimated at \$559,500. If extra work is necessary before topsoil and planting are added the cost is estimated at \$1.13 million.

According to a section of a report by Vancouver consultants hired by the government to look into the problem last year, the compacted-till proposal is seen as having a smaller chance of suc-

cess than going directly for a synthetic membrane cover.

Use of a synthetic membrane cover and chemical treatment are cited as having "a high probability of success", compared with four other options seen as having a "moderate" chance for success.

The four with moderate chances of success are the use of compacted till, alkaline trenches, removal of pyritic waste to lakes, and waste removal and mixing.

A total of 17 options were scored on a mixture of cost-benefit and cost-effectiveness, 10 of them involving measures to prevent acid generation at source. The other seven consid-

ered collection and treatment after generation.

Father Charles Brandt, chairman of the Comox Valley Steelhead Society's Tsolum River enhancement committee, called the announcement of the program "a great relief."

Brandt said the mine site has been leaking acid for about 20 years since the operation was abandoned. The problem was identified in 1984 due to a severe decline in downstream fisheries, which the consultants say shows the problem was present downstream by 1980.

Brandt said the Steelhead Society has been pressing for remedial action for four years. In

desperation it almost agreed to fund an experiment using micro-organisms to consume copper in the waters downstream.

"I think the society is responsible for this because we've made it public time and time again," said Brandt. "(Late local author and conservationist) Roderick Haig-Brown said you never win an environmental battle, but I think this shows you can."

Brandt was not prepared to predict the likely effectiveness of the initial stage of the program.

"The area up there is subject to a lot of snow melt in April and May, and it's really hard to predict," he said.