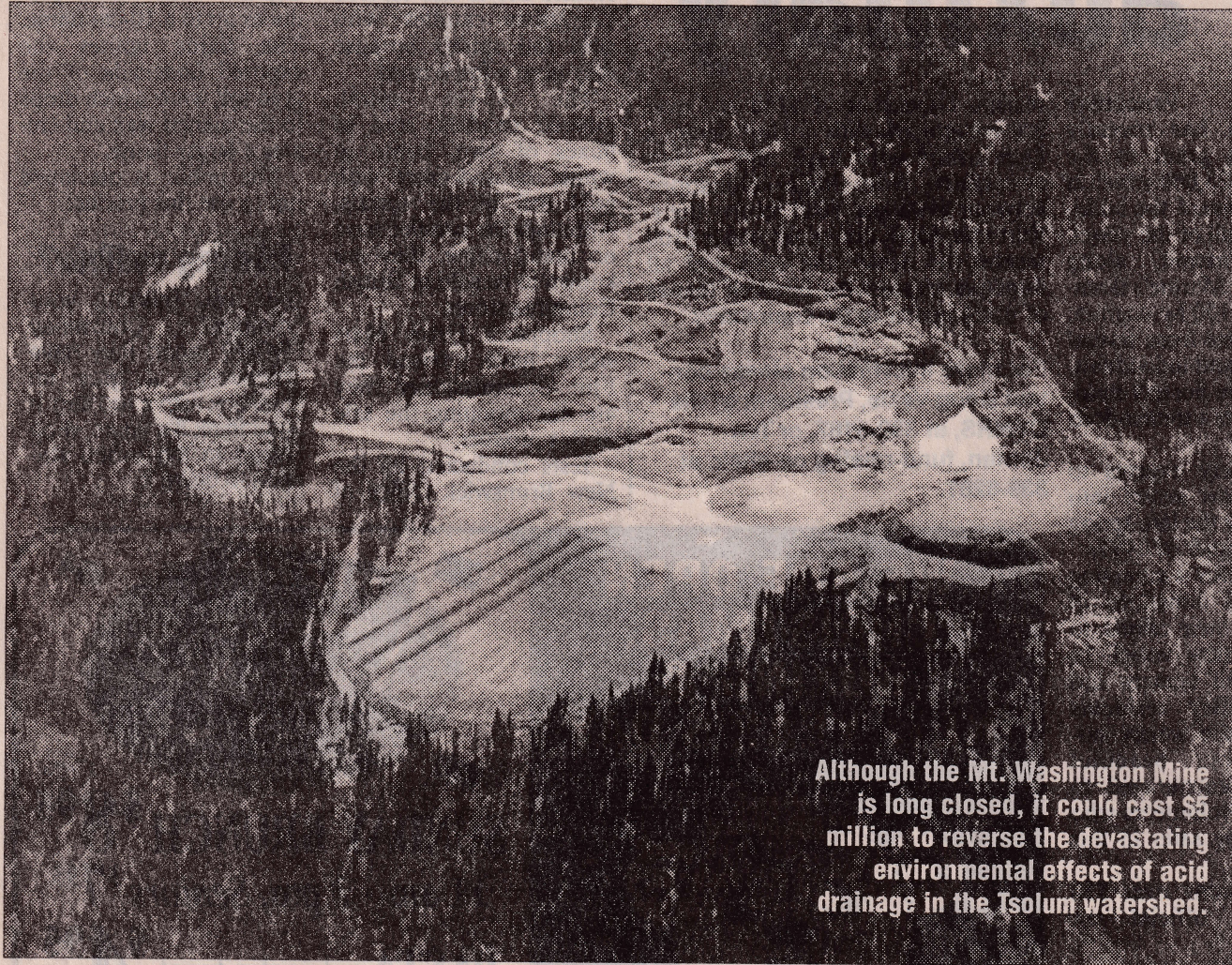


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Old mine reclamation urged to save Tsolum



Although the Mt. Washington Mine is long closed, it could cost \$5 million to reverse the devastating environmental effects of acid drainage in the Tsolum watershed.

Report stresses local group involvement as key element in restoring vital salmon river

By Andrew Findlay
Echo Staff

A recently released report on the Tsolum River calls for a "serious funding commitment" from government to fix the damage caused by 30 years of acid drainage from the long-closed Mt. Washington Mine.

The report estimates a hefty cost of up to \$5 million will be required for further evaluation and implementation of restoration projects on the river.

AGRA Earth & Environment Ltd. was contracted by the environment ministry to do the study, which details the decline of fish stocks in the Tsolum River and the significant negative socio-economic impacts on the Comox Valley. The study identifies Tsolum River restoration as "a major challenge but also a unique opportunity" because of potential job and educational opportunities the project could offer valley residents.

Charles Brandt, of the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee, welcomes the report, which he said confirms what concerned citizens have known for years about contamination in the river. Although the report was completed in July, Brandt believes the government may have been reluctant to go public because of the high price tag attached to river clean-up.

"I'm pretty happy with the study. The government is going to have to cough-up with some funding, so we want to keep the momentum going. A lot of jobs could come from river restoration," said Brandt.

A key recommendation of the report is that mine reclamation efforts should be carried out in conjunction with long-term watershed restoration and management. Losses to the once productive pink, coho and chum salmon fishery on the Tsolum are estimated at a whopping \$703,000 annually. Factor in the crushed steelhead fishery and the amount jumps to over \$1 million in lost fish potential.

However, the study indicated that declines in pink salmon have been caused in part by low flows in the river. Brandt agrees that reduced water levels, possibly caused by damage from logging, is a serious problem on the Tsolum, and only emphasizes the need for an integrated resource management plan for the entire watershed. But the report is clear in its recommendation that reclamation of the Mt. Washington Mine is of paramount importance for replenishing fish stocks and water quality.

As part of the overall strategy for the Tsolum River, the report states that taking advantage of local, established organizations like the Comox Valley Watershed Assembly, is the best route to reviving the river.

"Instead of senior governments creating and inserting another organization into the Comox Valley to coordinate restoration in the Tsolum watershed and reclamation of the mine site, opportunities for empowering and enhancing an existing organization should be explored," says the report.

Examples for public involvement in mine reclama-

tion projects can be found in the B.C. communities of Houston, Kimberley and Trail. The report suggests these projects could be canvassed and used as a model for Tsolum River restoration and management.

Acid drainage from the mine has been killing fish in the Tsolum for decades. Studies found copper concentrations as high as 110 parts per billion, far exceeding the Ministry of Environment's target of 11 ppb for the river. An estimated 96 per cent reduction in copper will be required in Pyrrhotite Creek, a Tsolum River tributary, to meet the target.

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A number of abatement strategies that could be used to stem the flow of acid drainage are discussed in the report. Because of the remote, mountainous location of the mine and the intense spring run-offs associated with the area, reclamation efforts are expected to be challenging and expensive. Past projects at other abandoned mine-sites have used upslope water diversion techniques, ground water cut-off, and collect-and-treat technology.

The study points to opportunities for using waste from other industrial operations in the valley, such as wood chips and sludge from pulp mills, for neutralizing acids in the mine waste.

"Waste from one source in the region providing a useful resource to address an environmental problem in the region is an appealing opportunity to be explored," says the report.

Brandt hopes John Wiens, one of the principal authors of the study, will come to the Comox Valley to chat with Tsolum River stakeholders.

"I'd like to see John Wiens invited to this area to discuss the report," said Brandt. "It would be very helpful."

Ron Driedger, director of the environment ministry's Pollution Prevention and Remediation Branch, has pledged his commitment to the Tsolum restoration process.

In a recent letter to Brandt and the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee, Driedger said his department will hold discussions with stakeholders over the next few months to plan funding and technical strategies.