

Plan to clean up river tainted by mine hailed

By GLENN BOHN
Sun Environment Reporter

VICTORIA — The B.C. Wildlife Federation has welcomed a program to clean up a Vancouver Island river contaminated with acid mine drainage.

Ralph Shaw, a federation vice-president and saltwater fisheries spokesman, said the B.C. government's promised reclamation of the Tsolum River was "just something wonderful" when so many environmental issues remain unresolved.

Some runs of salmon and steelhead in the river dropped dramatically after the mid-1960s, when Mount Washington Copper closed its mine near Courtenay and toxic levels of copper began contaminating the river in spring and fall.

"There's no question in my mind, and in the minds of steelhead fishermen in this (Cowichan Valley), that acid mine drainage (AMD) broke the Tsolum River ... just destroyed it," Shaw said in an interview.

The B.C. government announced Monday the start of a program to control AMD from mines no longer operating but still generating acid.

A government background paper describes AMD as "a serious, long-term pollution problem" and says at least five abandoned mines in B.C. are still generating acids. The backgrounder says the province has 250 million tonnes of acid-generating waste rock — or 80 per cent of the Canadian total — "and this total is increasing by 25 million tonnes each year."

The control program is to begin with the construction of a clay seal over the waste rock pile at the abandoned Mount Washington mine at a cost of \$600,000 in taxpayers' money.

If that doesn't slow the flow of acid, government is prepared to spend an additional \$1.2 million to put an artificial membrane over the rock pile, said a statement released Monday.

"This will protect the Tsolum River from further contamination," said Advanced Education Minister Stan Hagen, whose Comox riding includes the affected area. "The river's rehabilitation has begun."

Opposition environment critic Joan Smallwood, who called a news conference in January to publicize the threat of acid mine drainage and demand the province negotiate multi-million dollar "superfunds" with mining companies, said the government was "finally acknowledging a problem that exists at mines throughout B.C."

"The threat to British Columbians, fish, wildlife and water supplies is too great for the government to continue turning a blind eye."

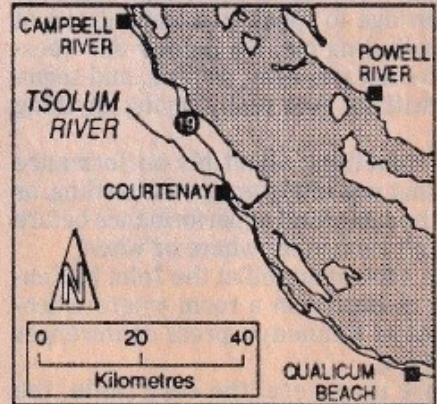
Environment and Parks Minister Bruce Strachan said the Mount Washington project will help in developing effective and affordable solutions to AMD problems elsewhere.

"In addition to rehabilitating existing sites, which can be extremely costly, the province is undertaking a long-term program to predict and prevent this kind of contamination," Strachan said.

When sulphur-bearing rocks are mined, broken up and exposed to oxygen and water, they can generate huge quantities of sulphuric acid. The phenomenon is aided by a natural bacterium that releases even more toxic metals, such as cadmium, copper and zinc.

Environment Canada's acid mine expert Keith Ferguson has warned that once an mine starts generating acids, the flow could continue for "decades, centuries, or perhaps millennia."

Environmental groups such as Friends of Strathcona have cited the dangers of AMD in their campaigns



against mining in the so-called "recreation areas" surrounded by provincial parks.

A government background paper distributed with a news release acknowledges for the first time that "acid mine wastes are a serious, long-term pollution problem at several locations in B.C. They can severely affect water quality, killing fish and other aquatic life.

"In some cases the problem arises shortly after mining has begun; in others, it may not appear for decades, long after the site has been abandoned."

The backgrounder dealt with the sensitive issue of liability by noting that since 1969, mine owners have been responsible under the Mines Act for site rehabilitation and reclamation.



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