

OPINION

Taxes misused while Tsolum suffers

The following is a letter sent to Environment Minister Bruce Strachan, by Father Charles A.E. Brandt, chairman of the Tsolum River Enhancement Committee of the Comox Valley chapter of the B.C. Steelhead Society.

The Tsolum River is dead! We made this identical statement to one of your recent predecessors on April 24, 1985. The death of the Tsolum River is due to copper poisoning caused by acid mine generation emanating from the abandoned Mt. Washington Copper open pit mine at the headwaters of the Tsolum River. High lethal concentrations of copper are continually being leached from these unreclaimed tons of waste rock at the abandoned mine, and pass via Phyrhotite and Murex creeks into the Tsolum River and from there into the Courtenay River and estuary.

As a consequence of these toxic copper levels, the salmonid stocks of the Tsolum River have been almost totally decimated. A review of fish returns indicates that coho salmon have declined since the early '70s. All fish have declined drastically since 1984 indicating that the aquatic

environment has been severely affected since 1980.

Through testing and monitoring by members of your ministry, in conjunction with MEMPR, and the federal Ministry of Environment (EPS) along with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, there remains no doubt that the decline of fish stocks in the Tsolum is attributable to high levels of copper throughout the year, but especially in the peak periods of rainfall (October-November) and snowmelt (May-June).

Controlled experiments have been performed by your ministry in the laboratory and in situ (in the Tsolum River) which prove beyond all doubt that copper is killing salmonids. And yet you allow this poisoning to continue year after year. Mr. Minister, are you ever going to take action? We had hoped against hope that you were finally going to take action during the late spring and summer of 1987. Now nothing can be done before late spring 1988 because of the heavy snows in the area. Is this inaction going to continue year after year?

It was under your government

that Mt. Washington Copper Company was allowed to depart in 1967 without reclaiming the mine site. We have now 20 years of acid mine generation.

Your ministry has known of the high levels of copper in the Tsolum River since 1975. In April 1986 your ministry issued "A Preliminary Assessment of Acid Mine Drainage from an Abandoned Mine on Mt. Washington, B.C." This report points out that high levels of copper from the runoff entering the Tsolum River are "concentrations above the criterion for the protection of aquatic life and occurred throughout the drainage system."

In addition, your ministry has done feasibility studies on costing and the availability of till to cover the mine site. You have done some ditching near the waste rock, installed a gauge on Phyrhotite Creek to study the hydrology and done some sandbagging in the swamp area.

In 1987 your ministry hired the consulting firm of Steffen Robertson & Kirsten of Vancouver (at a cost of \$20,000?) to do an Acid Mine

Drainage Abatement Study of Mt. Washington. Although this report was paid for by taxpayers' money it has never been made public.

The objective of the abatement plan was to eliminate the impact of acid mine drainage on the fish in the Tsolum River through rehabilitation of the waste rock dump. The consultants presented various options for the rehabilitation with the probability of success for each.

The preferred option is covering the contaminated area with compacted till and possibly adding a synthetic membrane if necessary. This would cost less than \$600,000 with some maintenance cost of approximately \$2,000 a year. With this method there is a success probability of 99 per cent and it would have at the very least a long-lasting, very substantial benefit.

It is estimated that this would ultimately benefit the Fisheries by approximately \$9 million. This does not include the sport and commercial fisheries increases. This is a pretty fair return on the investment of taxpayers' monies!

And yet, Mr. Minister, you have

not acted on this report, even though it has been in your hands since July of 1987. Can we finally expect you to take definitive action in the very near future?

To my mind it is really appalling -- the use and misuse of taxpayers' monies. A case in point is the Courtenay Airpark and Sewage Lagoon. Recently, through the influence of our Minister of State, the Hon. Stan Hagen, Courtenay received a grant of \$350,000 to realign the runway of the airpark. The total cost of this venture will be in excess of \$600,000. The reason given by Mr. Hagen for the grant was to keep the airpark open.

There was never any danger of the airpark being closed down unless it became a commercial airpark for which there is already provision at Comox three miles away. It is understood by all that this will never be a permanent airpark. So here is \$600,000 of taxpayers' money that could have been used to reclaim Mt. Washington being spent unnecessarily on a temporary airpark improvement which at the same time will either partially or fully

destroy a wildlife marsh and bird sanctuary.

This is not the place to comment on Mr. Hagen's fence-sitting on the issue of the opening up mining in Strathcona Park, which could result in additional acid mine generation affecting other streams. Mt. Washington, the Tsolum River and Strathcona Park all lie within Mr. Hagen's riding.

Mr. Minister, all of B.C. and now much of Canada is aware of the acid mine generation on Mt. Washington and how it has impacted on the Tsolum River and its fishery. You have in your hands the Consultant's Report that would appear to be 99 per cent successful if followed in rehabilitating the mine and the river -- at no great expense and with a benefit to the Fisheries of \$9 million plus benefits to the community resulting from the sport and commercial fisheries increases.

Will your government, after 20 years of acid mine generation on Mt. Washington, finally take action and return the Tsolum River to its natural capacity and even to an enhanced state?