

G. Shel Jan 8 '88

# Taxpayers will be stuck with bill

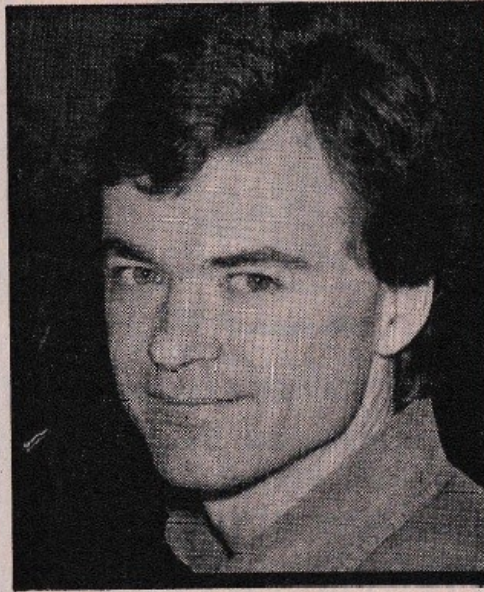
**A**S big a problem as the copper-dead Tsolum River may seem to us in the Comox Valley, it's small compared with some of the time bombs ticking away in other parts of the province.

What makes the Tsolum different is that the problem got away, and it looks like taxpayers will have to foot the entire bill for a clean-up.

The scope of acid mine drainage, and how it can be prevented or treated, is being looked at by a task force that includes representatives from mining companies and the federal and provincial governments.

Bob Dawson, the manager of technical services for the provincial waste management branch, is on the task force's treatment and control subcommittee.

He told me that the Tsolum is seen as a priority, and the task force goes along with the recommendation of government consultants. They say waste rock and exposed ore at the abandoned Mount Washington copper mine should be covered with till and capped with a plastic membrane. This would prevent copper from making contact with oxygen and water, a combination that generates acid which in turn seeps into the water system and kills fish.



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It will cost about \$600,000. Not a huge sum of money, relatively speaking, but an amount that would have to be paid for entirely from government funds.

This puts the government in an awkward situation because in most cases where acid mine drainage occurs, mining companies pay for their own pollution prevention measures, and are willing to pay at least part of the cost for treatment

50 to 100 years after the mine is abandoned and acid drainage is still a problem.

At the Equity Silver mine near Smithers, for example, the company is paying \$1 million a year to control pollution. But the question is, who's going to be paying 100 years from now? Mining companies, especially, want an answer to this because, of course, it cuts into the profitability of a venture if it is still costing you a century or more after it is finished.

There are about half a dozen other mines in the same situation around B.C.

The Mount Washington Copper mine was abandoned 20 years ago, and the chances of making the company pay anything are slim at best -- especially considering that there were no regulations at the time that would compel them to do so.

Dawson wasn't able to shed much new light on the status of the consultant's report on the Tsolum. But he figures the ministry of environment executive is simply weighing its priorities on spending. It was a bit late to get started on capping Mount Washington waste rock last summer, he said, and if something is going to be done it will likely happen next summer when heavy equip-

ment can be moved into the area.

And for the rest of the province, the acid mine drainage task force hopes to have a list of research priorities by the end of this year, and work underway next year.

While some members of the acid mine drainage task force also sit on a task force concerned with Mount Washington, the Tsolum problem is considered separate. It is seen as a place where, with a good chance of success, the technology for treatment could be demonstrated.

The bottom line, though, is that the river is still dead. Frustration over this, coupled with a desire to be constructive, led the Comox Valley chapter of the Steelhead Society to consider a proposal to raise \$535,000 for a private company to use microbes to eat up the copper pollution.

The government's decision to wait until next summer (at the earliest) to take action on the Tsolum may be wise if the objective is to proceed with caution. But the honest hopes of Valley residents for a clean river -- to the point of being willing to put \$535,000 where their mouths are -- should demonstrate to the government the importance of making a public commitment as soon as possible to cleaning up the Tsolum.