

# Comox District Free Press

ESTABLISHED 1891 NO. 71

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1992

55 CENTS

## Tsolum copper levels decline

By **RUSS PARADICE**

After five years of work, the \$1.4-million Mt. Washington mine reclamation project is finally beginning to lower copper levels in the Tsolum River.

"I think I was more relieved than elated when I first saw these new test results," says project head Murray Galbraith, who is a mine reclamation engineer with the Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources.

"But I am very pleased with these latest results. They are very encouraging."

The complex and partly experimental project began in 1988. In 1988, 1989, 1990 and 1991, despite considerable work undertaken each summer, monitoring results showed no change in the amount of copper leaching out of the mine site.

All that changed this spring when test results showed that the

rate of copper leaching out of the site had plunged about 50 per cent.

Father Charles Brandt, who lobbied Victoria in the mid-1980s to undertake the project, has received additional proof that the project is starting to work.

For the last few years, the local chapter of the Steelhead Society of B.C. has put up the money to measure copper levels in the lower reaches of the Tsolum.

Results from the first half of 1992 show "an appreciable drop in copper concentrations," Brandt says.

"I was really quite impressed to see copper levels as low as ten micrograms per litre of water," Brandt says. "I'm used to seeing readings of 65 micrograms per litre."

Prior to being spiked with lethal levels of copper pollution, the Tsolum River was a "truly

magnificent river" boasting prolific salmonid and steelhead runs, Brandt says. The pollution decimated the Tsolum fishery.

If test results this fall and next spring show continued improvement, "then I think we should begin to look seriously at restocking the river with steelhead, coho, cutthroat and pink salmon," he says.

The source of this vexing pollution problem is an abandoned

open pit copper mine located on a Mt. Washington slope about five kilometres away from the ski resort.

Although the ill-starred mine only operated from 1964 to 1967, and although it was just a puny mine, barely a scrape on the hillside by today's standards, it has left behind a terrible legacy in the form of acid mine drainage.