

# Tsolum River gets boost from province

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Forty years after the Mt. Washington copper mine ceased operation, one of the province's most notorious toxic sites just got one step closer to a permanent fix.

Provincial environment minister Barry Penner announced Saturday \$50,000 to evaluate a cap for the mine site.

The money, given to the Pacific Salmon Foundation and their partners, will go towards an engineering study aimed at creating a long term solution to acid drainage from the abandoned mine site.

The minister praised the efforts of the Tsolum River Restoration Society, who have spearheaded much of the work in the river system.

"You can't wait for government to do everything," Penner said, speaking at the Headquarters Creek Hatchery near Merville.

"But what this group has done is just phenomenal."

The mine closed in 1967 after the company went bankrupt, and by the 1980s acid leaching from the site had killed virtually all life in the Tsolum River.

Through the efforts of the TRRS the river has been brought back to life.

The group is in the process of finalizing terms of reference for the engineering report, which will develop a remediation plan.

The plan will include cost estimates.

(Cont. on page 3)

## THE ISSUE AT A GLANCE

- The Tsolum River originates on Mount Washington and runs through the Comox Valley to Courtenay. The river historically supported large populations of salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout.

- The local economic benefit of the resulting fishery was estimated in 1995 dollars to be in excess of \$2 million.

- An open pit copper mine operated on Mount Washington from 1964 to 1967 prior to going bankrupt.

- In 1986, Environmental Impact Assessment work carried out by the province found that copper leaching from the abandoned mine had virtually eliminated the fisheries resource in the entire Tsolum River watershed.

- In 2003, a six-way partnership led to a wetland project, which has reduced the copper levels in the Tsolum River to the point that fish stocks are returning to the river.

- Approximately \$80,000 is required to fund an engineering study to determine an appropriate remediation plan, and to estimate costs.

- The present landowner is Timber West, while the base mineral rights are held by Fording Coal and the precious metal rights by Better Resources Ltd.

- The Mining Association of B.C. also has recently come on board and will provide technical and financial support to the remediation project.

*Source: BC Ministry of Environment*

# Province helps Tsolum restoration effort

(Cont. from page 1)

By putting money into the engineering report, the ministry seems to have signaled support to seeing the project through.

A permanent cap for the mine site, said TRRS spokesperson Jack Minard, will cost an estimated \$4 to \$10 million.

In the fall of 2003 TimberWest built a wetland designed to draw much of the acidic copper leachate out of the water.

So far the wetland has been a success, Minard

said, but the wetland is not a long term solution – he estimated in another 10 years the copper and acidity levels will begin to rise again.

Minard said the wetland is essentially buying time until a permanent fix is put in place.

“This a major first step in that direction,” Minard said.

The Mining Association of BC, Department of Fisheries and Oceans and TimberWest are also partners, each contributing additional money toward the study.

Wayne White, head of the TRRS mine site committee, said the mining association of BC has contributed money and expertise in laying out the terms of reference for the engineering study.

The ministry has put some money into the Tsolum in the past, including \$1.5 million toward a cap in the late 80s.

But the cap covers just a small area of the site and while it has improved water quality somewhat, the river remained an inhospitable place.

The plan is expected to go out to tender in the next month, with a final report expected by late fall or early winter.

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