

Tsolum River gets money for restoration

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Black Press

The Tsolum River Restoration Society has, after nearly 25 years, been given everything it wants and more.

An announcement Monday morning from the Ministry of Environment granted \$4.5 million to the river's restoration partnership group to remediate an old mine site that's poisoning the river and nearly decimated fish stocks.

"Wow," said Jack Minard, Tsolum River society co-ordinator about the amount. "(This is a) Culmination of 10 years of work for me."

Provincial environment minister Barry Penner was in Courtenay at a private property overlooking the river to say the funding gave them "a chance to put right something that went terribly wrong," said Penner.

"This has been a long-term project and I think we now have...what the long-term solution will be," said Penner.

Two years ago SRK Consulting was hired to develop a remediation plan that would stop copper sulphate from leaching into the river.

That was 23 years after the alarm was first raised over the dying river when, in 1982, not one of 2.5 million pink fry that were released into the water,



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Berry Penner (left) counts fish in the Tsolum River while Kevin Krueger and Stan Hagen (far right) watch.

returned.

The plan SRK has developed proposes a bituminous liner be put on the contaminated areas, to protect water from the copper leachate.

It also includes a one-metre deep glacial till layer on top of that, which will be revegetated to protect material from the elements.

The funding is more than the group had asked for to cover the project — estimated at \$4.145 million — and will include all the contingencies they'd proposed, said Minard, such as a water treatment system.

Over the years, they've tried different ways of improving the water quality in the Tsolum and there

have been some tangible returns in increased numbers of fish in the river, but concerns over how long some of that work would last led to this more extensive project.

Comox Valley MLA Stan Hagen said it was one of his proudest moments as the area's elected representative.

"I think in my political history, that's probably the most significant announcement I've ever made in my riding," said Hagen.

He acknowledged the work of all the people who've remained committed to the Tsolum River cause over the years — people like Ruth Masters and Charles Brandt — and thanked his colleagues in Victoria for

their support.

Minister of State for Mines Kevin Krueger was also on hand to praise the work in the river and assure the public that environmental damage like the aftermath of this mine could never happen now.

"Situations like this are not allowed to develop in present mines and nobody in the industry wants it any different," said Krueger. "The people of our province scrutinize the mining industry and we like that."

"The people, like this government, have a high expectation."

New operations require full remediation plans now, and a pre-paid bond that is only returned when the work is done.

Meanwhile, the mine that caused this damage after only a couple years of operations in the late-1960s will finally be given the treatment expected today.

The work to cover the old mine site is expected to begin when the snow melts — in early July at the latest.

For more information on the project and to see a full copy of the SRK report, visit www.tsolumriver.org.