

Mine rehab project may be halted for assessment

By RUSS PARADICE

Further work on the Mt. Washington mine rehabilitation project will likely be halted to enable experts to "determine whether the project is working or not," Father Charles Brandt says.

"If it's not working, then we'll have to re-evaluate the whole problem," says Brandt. "But I'm still hopeful that it is going to work."

The purpose of the \$1.4 million-plus provincial project is to stop a lethal flow of copper leachates from streaming out of an abandoned open pit copper mine and into the Tsolum River system. The leaching is being caused by a process known as acid mine drainage.

The Ministry of Energy, Mines and Petroleum Resources began the complex and largely experimental project in 1988.

During the period from 1988-91 inclusive, despite considerable work undertaken each summer, monitoring results each year showed no change in the amount of copper leaching out of the mine site.

Last spring, much to the relief of project officials, test results showed that the rate of copper leaching out of the site had fallen by about 50 per cent, Brandt said last summer.

Subsequent test results have shown that the rate of copper loading from the site has bounced back up again.

Project head Murray Galbraith, who is a mine reclamation engineer, says the increased copper levels are likely due to the disturbance caused by heavy equipment working on the pit floor last summer.

"In the summer we hit the last deep pocket of mine waste in the pit floor," he said in an interview from Victoria. "There's a school of thought that says we should let things settle down up there before we do any more work."

Galbraith says it's his expectation that no heavy work will be undertaken at the site this summer, although additional monitoring equipment will be installed.

Galbraith himself supports the idea of stopping work on the site until a clearer picture emerges of the project's effectiveness.

"The ministry," he stressed, "is still committed to a final clean-up"

Cliff Rennie, president and chairman of Better Resources Ltd., which controls mineral rights on the mountain, has been an ardent critic of the project, calling it a "failed experiment."

"What was originally billed as a \$500,000, one-year cure of the Mt. Washington problem has now turned into a \$1.5 million five-year experiment with questionable reduction in copper levels," he said last summer.

Rennie's company has recommended for years that the government neutralize water flowing out of the site by adding lime to it.

Rennie has argued that the ministry has operated on a double standard by choosing to experiment on Mt. Washington for the past five years rather than take direct action to stop the copper pollution. A private company would never be allowed to do the same thing, he has said.

Galbraith says the consensus of the 10-member project technical committee is that the current approach, that of clearing off the waste rock and then covering it, "is still the best way to go."