

# Progress being made on leaching Mount Washington project results said encouraging

Work is under way again on Mount Washington this summer to try to put a stop to the lethal levels of copper leaching from the old copper mine on the mountainside.

And Father Charles Brandt, who has been intimately involved with the problem and the work to correct it which has been carried out in the area over the past several years, indicated he is keeping his fingers crossed that the main source of the leachate has now been identified and is being tackled.

Speaking after a visit to the site where work is being carried out through government agencies, Brandt said there are signs that the action being taken may be the answer. If it isn't, he doesn't know what the government can do to deal with the problem.

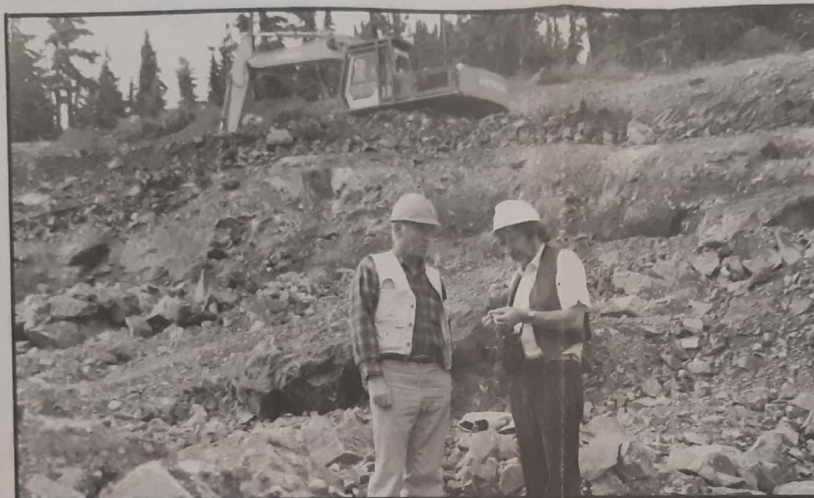
"I don't know what else they could do," he confessed.

He added that there are some other steps which could be taken, such as putting in huge plastic covers at the site, but he suggested that that would be "really expensive" at perhaps \$1.5 million.

At the moment, he indicated, the government is pinning its hopes on removing, stockpiling and capping waste material which had high levels of copper leaching from it and was being carried down the hillside to the Tsolum.

Acid mine-drainage requires both water and oxygen in order to begin, and that process is speeded up and intensified when the acidic waste rock is crushed into smaller pieces. Once started the acid releases metals such as copper, which are then carried downhill by rain and surface runoff.

At Mount Washington the waste rock was left in large dumps and in compacted layers on the pit floor. It is all to be put into piles, and will then be capped by impermeable material to prevent water and oxygen getting in, thus stifling the acid drainage.



**PROJECT SUPERVISOR** Murray Galbraith discusses acid-generating material with Father Charles Brandt (right) at Mount Washington mine cleanup site.

As a former fisheries officer who worked on the Tsolum River downstream from the site of the mine in 1968, Brandt said the river used to have magnificent runs of salmon, both pinks and coho, as well as being a "marvellous" steelhead river.

"I read a report about two weeks ago that one person said there used to be a run of about 500,000 coho in there," he said. "Usually we heard it was about 200,000, and that was back in the 1950s."

Brandt said, however, that all that ended within a few years, after the Mount Washington Copper Mine went out of business and abandoned its workings in the mid-1960s.

Eventually elevated levels of copper draining down into the Tsolum were tracked to the mine, and finally four years ago, under pressure from the Comox valley chapter of the Steelhead Society of B.C. spearheaded by Brandt, the government began bringing in personnel and machinery to put measures in place to try to

put an end to the acid-mine drainage and leachate coming from the property.

While there has reportedly been no appreciable decrease in copper levels in the river to date, however, Brandt said the latest step, begun two years ago on an experimental basis, is showing signs of promise.

Brandt explained that the heart of the leachate now seems to be a waste pit. A small area was cleaned initially, and project supervisor Murray Galbraith was quoted in an interview last week as saying that "encouraging" results have been obtained from a small 2,800-square-metre "toe" section of the pit floor.

Waste was excavated from the floor and put into piles and the floor was then powerwashed down to the uncovered bedrock.

And Galbraith is cited as saying that he plans to use two-inch, fibre-reinforced concrete to cover the piles of removed waste rock, to prevent water and oxygen getting in and creating the acid which then releases the copper.

Previously, the seepage from the toe of the pit area had had the same copper and acidity levels as had been found elsewhere on the three-hectare pit floor.

According to Galbraith, however, the levels from the washed and cleaned segment of the pit

have now been reduced to normal background and the groundwater running through the site has been tagged as "basically clean".

Brandt estimates that around \$1 million has been spent on tackling the Mount Washington problem to date.

The Comox Valley Steelhead Society chapter has put in around \$4,500 of its own money each year in the past few years, to aid the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in water sampling downstream from the site, to monitor the project's progress.

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