

Editorial: Ball dropped on Colquitz spill

Times Colonist

DECEMBER 3, 2016 12:52 AM

It should not have taken citizen volunteers to sound the alarm about mud and dirty water from the McKenzie interchange project entering the Colquitz River — it's the provincial government's responsibility to protect the environment.

Transportation Minister Todd Stone says measures have been taken at the site to prevent further spills of mud into the salmon-bearing river, and the construction site now has better environmental monitoring, upgraded water-filtration systems and new barriers to prevent dirty water from getting into the Colquitz.

"We've also put in place 24/7 environmental monitoring — not just through the contractor, which was there previously, but now we have that through the ministry, as well," Stone said.

"I'm very confident that these multiple layers of diligence are going to ensure that ... a similar incident doesn't repeat itself."

It's good that the government is doing something to reduce the potential for environmental damage, and that round-the-clock environmental monitoring has been implemented. But the government should have been ahead of the game, not playing catch-up.

Inspectors should have been on site as soon as ground was broken to ensure measures were in place to prevent harm. That would not be an unreasonable requirement for an \$85-million project.

Stone blamed the spill on heavy rainfall and the discovery of a forgotten drain pipe that discharged a significant amount of water onto the site near the intersection of McKenzie Avenue and the Trans-Canada Highway.

"We had an unfortunate series of events that was largely out of the ministry's control that resulted in a huge amount of water all pooling at the same time," he said.

Granted, unexpected problems can occur in a project of this scope, but it's the rainy season, and earth and rocks are being moved near a sensitive river. Long before shovels were put into the ground, much concern was expressed about the potential harm to the environment in the area of the interchange project, including Cuthbert Holmes Park and the Colquitz River.

To call the Colquitz a river might be a bit of a stretch. Thousands of motorists drive the Trans-Canada Highway every day, likely unaware they are crossing a river. But although the stream is small, it is important, especially to the coho salmon that make their way up the river to spawn — volunteers have counted 1,100 this year.

Development has been hard on the Colquitz, and individuals and groups have worked diligently over the years to restore the stream, as much as possible, to its natural condition, and they continue to advocate and work for its preservation. Others worked for decades to clean up the much-abused Gorge Waterway, which is connected to Portage Inlet into which the Colquitz flows, and their achievement is an environmental success story.

It should not have come as a surprise that the interchange project would put these areas in danger, and protection of the stream, the watershed and adjacent habitat should have been high on the provincial government's list of priorities.

It shouldn't have taken volunteers to shame the government into doing the right thing.

© Copyright Times Colonist