

McKenzie interchange site upgraded to protect Colquitz River

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Plastic barriers are used to keep chemicals and debris from reaching Colquitz River during construction of the McKenzie interchange. But residents say mud and silt are spilling into the Colquitz River, threatening a coho spawning ground and a bird sanctuary. Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, TIMES COLONIST

Enhanced environmental protections should prevent further spills of mud into the Colquitz River near the McKenzie interchange project, Transportation Minister Todd Stone said Thursday.

Stone said the construction site now has better environmental monitoring, upgraded water filtration systems and new barriers to prevent dirty water from getting into the salmon-bearing river.

"I'm very confident that we've got the necessary mitigation measures in place," he said.

Area residents welcomed the improvements, but questioned why it took the recent release of mud and silt from the site to spur the government into action.

"They're putting a whole bunch of locks on the door now that the horse is out of the barn," said Dorothy Chambers, a volunteer river steward who has been doing coho salmon counts on the Colquitz for 11 years.

"These are measures that should have been in place."

Rob Wickson, president of the Gorge Tillicum Community Association, said the spill raises questions about the government's other commitments. The \$85-million construction project began in September with the province promising to minimize impacts on the Colquitz River.

"We're very appreciative that they've ponied up and decided to put some serious mitigation efforts into the project," Wickson said.

"It's surprising that it took our noticing of the incident, and the incident occurring, for that to happen. That's very disappointing, because we were assured all through this project by [Stone's] team that they have the highest professional standards and they were going to be very protective of the system."

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.

Stone said there is now twice as much silt fencing on site to prevent dirty water from running into nearby streams. As well, filtration systems were brought in to remove silt from the water before it is released.

"That helps ensure that any water that does leave the site is clean and not loaded with silt," he said.

"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.

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

B.C. NDP MLA Rob Fleming, who visited the site on Thursday, said the contractor has done a lot of work to prevent further problems.

"I think all parties are concerned that there not be any further risk to the Colquitz River and that the fish population be protected," he said.

"I heard a very sincere commitment to make sure that doesn't happen again, and they've physically done a lot of work on the site to prevent that."

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