

DFO to investigate contaminated sites

GIBSONS HARBOUR

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Four sites in Gibsons Harbour have been identified by the federal Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) as "contaminated," but further study is needed to determine if remedial action needs to be taken, a DFO spokesman told Coast Reporter this week.

"It's our intention to do some further investigation over the next couple of years," Robin Richardson, regional manager of client services for DFO's small craft harbours branch, said in a Sept. 17 interview.

Of the four sites listed as contaminated, two of them are the rock breakwaters, Richardson said. "The third one would be the harbour itself — the wharf and floats. The fourth one appears to be a rock. It could be a Coast Guard navigation item on a rock in the harbour," he said.

Regarding the breakwaters, "that's one area where we'd have to do some further assessment, because it is just rock," he said.

Richardson could not explain exactly why DFO listed the four sites as contaminated. "There are thousands of sites federally that are being assessed, and where we've found areas of environmental concern — through reviewing historical records, possibly followed up by sampling — they're identified as contaminated," he said. "Our priorities are to manage our properties safely, and many of the practices that were normal 20 or 30 years ago are no longer being followed."

The contamination, he added, could be any substance in air, water or soil that exceeds background concentrations.

"Potentially it could be a very low threshold and whatever the risk is would have to be assessed," he said.

Depending on the results of the assessment, mitigation could take the form of removal, containment "or sometimes just leaving it alone," he said, noting that the Gibsons Landing Harbour Authority (GLHA) has had its own environmental management plan in place for about 10 years and "are quite diligent with that."

The issue was raised during the GLHA annual general meeting on Sept. 10, when Gibsons Coun. Dan Bouman asked GLHA president Terry Rhodes if he could identify the four sites.

Rhodes said the GLHA did not receive a report on the sites, but would contact the small craft harbours branch the following day. Contacted a week later, Rhodes said he was awaiting the 2006 report, but was aware of the locations of the sites.

"You've got to realize the environment of a creosote-piled wharf," Rhodes said. "The creosote itself contributes to any environmental contamination."

Like Richardson, Rhodes noted that practices have changed and older harbours have taken "years and years of abuse."

In raising the issue, Bouman had expressed concern about potential aquifer contamination, but Rhodes categorically ruled that out. "There's no way we're contaminating the aquifer," he said.