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Province probing source of oily substance found in Central Saanich's Graham Creek

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Biologist Ian Bruce examines some of the unknown substance found Friday in Graham Creek, which runs through Centennial Park in Central Saanich. "Until we find out what the toxicity is, I'm concerned," he said. Photograph by: Adrian Lam

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Central Saanich municipal crews and the province are trying to identify the source of a spill that dumped globs of black goo in parts of Graham Creek.

An unknown substance as thick as roofing tar in some areas and as thin as mineral oil in others was discovered about 9:30 a.m. Friday. Municipal workers tested the liquid and erected signs that said: "Caution, recent oil spill, keep pets away from creek edge until further notice." The environmental damage is unknown.

"Until we find out what the toxicity is, I'm concerned," said Ian Bruce, executive co-ordinator of the Peninsula Streams Society. "My level of concern is quite high. I don't know what the oil is and its relative toxicity."

He sent sediment samples to a lab late Friday afternoon with results expected Monday.

Bruce has attended about six or eight oil spills, and says the substance he saw Friday doesn't have a scent or a rainbow-like sheen displayed by a lot of other hydrocarbons. "It's a different thing altogether. I want to get it analyzed right away."

The contamination stretches about six kilometres, from near Kirkpatrick Crescent by the Keating Cross Road industrial area, downstream to Hagan Creek and the ocean, Bruce estimated.

"I was just up there [at Hagan Creek] and I did see some sheen up there," Bruce said. "I can't definitively say that until [I get the results from] sediment samples."

Laurie Boyle, an environmental emergency response officer, was also on the scene Friday but unavailable for comment.

The Environment Ministry estimated the size of the spill — described as "an unknown substance (tar-like material) from an undetermined source" — at about three kilometres. "There has been no initial finding of material in the 200-metre downstream section between the Graham Creek weir and the creek mouth with Brentwood Bay," it said.

The ministry said its first priority is dealing with any immediate risks to public health and the environment — in part to devise interim containment strategies in case of rainfall and what impact that would have on the oily substance in the stream.

Environmentalists expressed concern for the cutthroat trout, mammals, birds, plants and soil in and around the restored stream.

"It's one of our crown jewels, and that's why it's so heartbreaking," said Denis Coupland, co-ordinator of the KENNES (Hagan-Graham Creek) Watershed Project.

The group began restoration and enhancement of the creek in 1997, and in 2002 cutthroat trout had returned to the 1.5-kilometre section of the creek that borders Centennial Park.

Coupland said the oil will leave a tarry scum on rocks and plants. "We could be put back years by what just happened," he said

Cutthroat trout are an indicator species in the creek, Coupland said. "But for me the fish are just an indicator species, and I am concerned about the whole ecosystem around the stream — the fish, frogs and insects in the stream, and everything that lives off the stream, and the plants and animals (mink, otter, muskrats) and birds and the insect species and the small crustaceans that catch in the creek."

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