

Federal fisheries department investigates sewer construction

Fish habitat damaged in Markham creeks

BY MIKE ADLER
Staff Writer

The federal Fisheries Department is investigating separate incidents in which York Region's sewer construction may have harmed fish habitat in Markham.

Robinson Creek, a Rouge River tributary considered important coldwater habitat for fish, suddenly went dry in November, according to neighbours and members of a local anglers group.

The creek, receiving groundwater pumped from the region's 16th Avenue sewer project, went dry due to "a technical matter of some sort" related to sewer construction, said Edwin DeBruyn, the department's Ontario chief of habitat operations.

The department is also investigating an incident in which sediment from the now-completed Ninth Line sewer project in Markham dumped into a Rouge watercourse, affecting fish habitat.

The department has also received complaints from residents about Spring Creek, a spring-fed stream feeding Robinson Creek, which went dry soon after water extraction for the 16th Avenue sewer began in 2002.

Ontario's Ministry of the Envi-

ronment this week also confirmed it is investigating "alleged non-compliance" with the region's permit to take water for the first phase of 16th Avenue sewer, but gave no more information. The permit under the Ontario Water Resources Act covers both withdrawal of groundwater along the sewer route and discharge of that water in Rouge streams, including Robinson Creek.

Glenn Anderson, president of the Metro East Anglers club, which has stocked the creek with rainbow and brown trout for at least six years, said Robinson was virtually dry and alerted provincial authorities.

"There was no water in it," he recalled this week. "Certainly not enough water for fish to live in it for very long."

The creek's fish population dropped significantly from one week earlier, said Doug Forder, field supervisor for Ontario Streams, a stream restoration group that sampled the same 100-metre reach of the creek on Nov. 10 and on Nov. 18, a day after the incident.

Using a technique called electrofishing, in which a mild shock stuns fish to the surface, Mr. Forder said he found no change in number of species but recorded 18 per cent fewer fish and a 32-per-cent drop in fish mass Nov. 18. "To me, that looks like a huge difference."

The creek is home to redeyed dace, a minnow classified as threatened in Ontario.

After a year of discussions, the

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Jim Robb
General manager Friends of the Rouge Watershed

department, ministry and other agencies agreed to let the 16th Avenue project's final phase begin this spring, with a higher water extraction rate and an elaborate system to pipe, heat and clean pumped groundwater, keeping Rouge streams in the area from going dry.

The Robinson Creek incident, however, proves the region's system is vulnerable to any glitch, Jim Robb, general manager of Friends of the Rouge Watershed, said.

"A relatively short duration failure of a pump, pipe or valve, or an accident or human error, will cause hundreds of metres of trout streams to stop flowing," Mr. Robb, conducting his own private prosecution of the region for allegedly harming fish habitat in the creek, warned senior federal politicians in a memo this month.

There was no pump failure at Robinson Creek, Mike Kemp, a spokesperson for the region said Friday.

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