

Penelakut Holding Vigil at Burial Site: Worried Hatchery will Spoil 'Place to Catch Up'

By Christina Martens
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Penelakut band members say they want the desecration of their ancestors to stop.

Earlier this year, Penelakut elders and Saltspring Island residents asked the Environmental Appeal Board to issue an order to stop development at Walker Hook on Saltspring Island.

Sablefin Hatcheries Ltd. wants to use the area for effluent from its black cod fish hatchery on Saltspring Island.

After the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection issued a permit, Sablefin agreed to do some digging to determine if there are any ancestral remains or artifacts on Walker Hook, known by the Penelakut as Syuhe'mun, the Place to Catch Up.

Thirteen bodies were found and the find was reported to Hul' Qumi' Num Treaty Group elders, said Penelakut elder Myrus James.

James noted further exploration revealed there are the remains of at least 700 and possibly as many as 1,500 ancestors of the Penelakut, Cowichan Tribes, Chemainus, Halalt and Lyackson First Nations on the site.

It's believed the area is one of the richest archaeological sites in the southern Gulf Islands, said James, and it's a place of spiritual importance to the Penelakut.

Sablefin says it found only parts of 11 bodies at the site and the waste from its operation is "ocean water," which will be transported to an aquifer between 25 and 40 feet below ground level via non-porous pvc piping.

"We've gone out of our way to protect First Nations interests," said Sablefin's Nancy Dixon.

Saltspring Island residents have expressed concerns about what will happen if effluent from the hatchery winds up in nearby marine waters and what impact that will have on local fish stocks.

Dixon said the company's project will have minimal impact on the environment and that years of farming, burning and building in the area have done more damage.

While they await for the EAB's decision, the Penelakut are organizing a vigil to remind the public of the importance of the site.

"We want to keep it in the forefront and keep the pressure on the EAB and the people wanting to develop this property," said Penelakut Tribe member Steve Sxwithul'txw.

The vigil is to take place this Saturday, Aug. 14, at 1:30 p.m. at Gulf Islands Secondary School in Ganges on Saltspring Island. A public forum will follow a trip to Walker Hook to visit the site.

Dixon said Sablefin won't interfere with the vigil but will continue to follow through with its application process.

The forum, chaired by James, will feature presentations from archaeologists Eric McLay and Kim Kornbacher, Donna Martin and Sharon Bywater of Saltspring Island Residents for Responsible Land, lawyer Renee Racette, Penelakut elders and Cowichan Tribes member Tim Kulchyski.

"We want to get as many people over there as we can," said Sxwithul'txw. "This is important to our elders and the youth should follow their example in protecting these sites."

A large contingent from Cowichan Tribes is expected to attend, said Dianne Hinkley.

"There are a lot of people interested in the outcome of this application," she said. "It's not just Penelakut buried there. We were one large community before the government divided us."

Anyone wishing to attend should call Wakeen at 1-250-383-2356 to reserve a spot or to organize transportation for those wishing to walk on to the ferry, which leaves Crofton at 8:30 a.m.