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The Amphibex, an amphibious excavator, begins the task of breaking up the ice jam on the Nechako River.

■ ICE JAM

Amphibex starts working

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Free Press

New Brunswick-based contractors Eco Technologies began work breaking up the ice jam on the Nechako River Sunday.

The contractors deployed an Amphibex amphibious excavator into the open water on the Fraser River. Since Sunday, it has been working its way up the Nechako, city development services director Bob Radloff told city council on Monday.

"This method is possible at this time. It has to work from an open-water end," Radloff said.

The Amphibex, built by Quebec-based Normrock Industries, resembles a conventional excavator built on a boat body. The 22-tonne machine can sail at up to eight knots and walk across land using its bucket arm and stabilizers.

As of Monday, the machine had cut a channel through the ice approximately 300m long and 30m wide. The ice jam was estimated to be six kilometres long.

City chief engineer Dave Dyer said it is impossible to guess how quick the progress will be.

The ice is compacted and hard, he said, but on Sunday an approximately 160m piece broke off and floated downstream.

"He's only been able to operate in the day-

time so far. Where the water is shallow he's fairly concerned about getting hung up," Dyer said. "He hopes if he gets far enough up the definable channel he'll be able to work at night."

In the meantime, the plan to pipe 15 degree Celsius water into the river to melt the jam is moving ahead, he said.

The 2.7km long, 12-inch PVC pipe linking Intercontinental Pulp to the river has been laid down, Dyer said. A heat fusion machine is being used to weld the plastic pipe together and work is being done on the connection to the mill's steam system.

The 18-inch pipe needed to deliver the water into the river is expected to arrive today, he said. It will likely be Friday before the city can start pumping the warm water into the river.

Some technical hurdles still need to be solved before the water can begin to flow.

"We want to get it into the middle of the river, and that is the challenge," Dyer said. "We're thinking of using a helicopter to move the pipe... but a helicopter can only lift so much."

Gabion dikes and earthen berms along River Road, Pulp Mill Road, Ongman Road, in the Delhaven area and along Morning Place have been raised to 0.6m above the 200-year flood level, Radloff said.

Water levels have continued to decline

since Jan. 5, but the possibility of another river surge remains, he said.

The controversial decision to raise River Road was made because building an equivalent berm between buildings on the north side of the river would be technically challenging, could damage riparian habitat and would expose the berm directly to the flow of the river, Radloff said.

Nechako River Industrial Group co-chairmen John Brink and John Elmslie said the road limits access to their companies - Brink Forest Products and Winton Global.

"The road itself and accesses... are engineer designed. We are committed to maintaining the surface of that road," Radloff said. "With one property we're working with their engineer of choice."

Mayor Colin Kinsley saluted the work city crews are doing in the short and medium term. Work on finding long-term solutions has already begun.

"We've just talked with the solicitor general about having a river flood assessment study," Kinsley said. "We're hoping the study... should take off soon."

Dike systems, dredging, land use and re-evaluating the 200-year flood level will all be part of that study.

For updates on the flood situation, go online to www.pgfreepress.com or visit the city's Web site at www.city.pg.bc.ca.