



Georgia Strait Alliance
Caring for our coastal waters



Friends of the Earth
Les Ami(e)s de la Terre



Canadian Environmental
Law Association



ecojustice
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MEDIA RELEASE

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Minimum Standards with Maximum Loopholes

New federal regulations for sewage would allow decades of continued pollution

TORONTO – New wastewater regulations proposed by the federal government would allow the continued dumping of raw and undertreated sewage by Canadian municipalities for nearly 30 years, environmental groups report.

“Instead of being required to upgrade their wastewater treatment, many cities will be handed up to a 30-year free pass to continue dumping sewage into our water,” said Elaine MacDonald, senior scientist at Ecojustice. “Canadians have been expecting genuine leadership on sewage from the feds but this is not it.”

A coalition of environmental groups are submitting formal comments on the federal *Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations* that were made public on March 20th. Despite mandating a minimum of secondary level sewage treatment for all Canadian municipalities, the regulations contain significant loopholes that would see sewage dumping continue at current levels for many cities until as late as 2039 and authorize the dumping of sewage lethal to fish, potentially forever.

“These regulations will weaken well-established pollution standards in this country, and allow the Canadian government to sanction the discharge of sewage effluent that is acutely lethal to fish,” stated Kaitlyn Mitchell, staff lawyer at Ecojustice. “This contradicts the goals of fish habitat protection and pollution prevention set out under the *Fisheries Act*, the law under which the new regulations fall.”

“We prosecuted Metro Vancouver over the alleged discharge of sewage lethal to fish,” continued David Lane of T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation. “Now the federal government is threatening to make that practice legal.”

The regulations also fail to address overflows of sewage from combined sewer systems (CSOs), a major source of raw sewage discharges in many Canadian municipalities. A loophole in the proposed regulations allows a facility to get an extra 10 to 20 years before it must comply with the regulatory standards just by filing a plan for a CSO.

“CSOs need to be eliminated not used as an excuse to delay much needed upgrades to sewage treatment plants,” said Rick Lindgren, a lawyer with the Canadian Environmental Law Association. “Any new wastewater regulations need to address sewage overflows in order to be effective and credible.”

Derek Stack, of Great Lakes United added, “The move is completely contrary to the spirit of renegotiating the Canada-United States Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement.”



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This regulation will allow cities – including major centres like Vancouver – to continue dumping under-treated sewage into our oceans for decades,” said Georgia Strait Alliance’s Christianne Wilhelmson. “This is shameful given that the US mandated advanced treatment over 30 years ago.”

“There is no rhyme or reason to this 10-30 year time frame for compliance. It’s been two decades since Environment Canada set out to modernize effluent treatment in Canada,” added Beatrice Olivastri of Friends of the Earth. “Back in 1992, they gave pulp and paper mills thirteen months to comply and, only for “exceptional circumstances”, another two years. In 2002, they gave metal mining up to five years to comply.”

Municipal wastewater treatment plants make up all of the top 14 water polluters in Canada, and in 2008 over 85% of all reported water pollution discharges were from these facilities. The formal comments being submitted by environmental groups recommend that timelines for upgrading facilities be shortened to 5 years (or 2015) for high risk facilities, 10 years (or 2020) for medium risk facilities, and 15 to 20 years (or 2030) for low risk facilities, and that major loopholes for key pollutants and CSOs be closed.

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