

toxic time bomb

good INTENTIONS
... down the drain?

Last month, the Conservative government implemented new bans on dumping pollutants such as untreated sewage, oil, chemicals, garbage, anti-fouling paints and air emissions from ships and recreational boats.

Violators could face fines from \$250,000 to \$1 million, or jail time of up to three years for violating the new regulations, which include a ban on dumping raw untreated sewage within three nautical miles of any coastline for vessels smaller than 400 tonnes, and 12 nautical miles for larger ships.

However, when it comes to determining whether the new rules will make a difference, the government gets an A for effort but falls short on effectiveness, says Christianne Wilhelmson, program co-ordinator with the Georgia Strait Alliance.

"The regulations themselves we're very supportive of, but there are two problems," explains Wilhelmson. Without any money or attention devoted to enforcement and so few pump-out stations for recreational boaters to dump their loads, the new rules lose their luster.

"If someone doesn't enforce them, these regulations aren't protecting the environment, and the public thinks they are," she says. "The fact that it's got these weaknesses means it's not going to do what it says it's going to."

And, when it comes to ramping up environmental protection in Canada, we may only need to look south of the border for some ideas.

"Canadians have this sense that we have really strong regulations, but – and some people are going to cringe when they hear this – the Americans have much better environmental protection than we do, and are much less subjective."

-Robyn Stubbs, 24 hours

The chemical ocean

Once boasting an abundant and healthy marine eco-system, B.C.'s west coast marine life is now fighting for survival against an endless stream of chemicals, toxins and waste.

In fact, if a killer whale washed up dead on B.C.'s shores today, the carcass would likely be considered hazardous waste due to the high levels of contaminants stored in its blubber, says David Lane, executive director of the T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation.

"We do know there are a host of harmful chemicals that kill fish and have long-term health impacts, and those chemicals are in our sewage, in our landfills and each and every input into our rivers and oceans," says Lane.

Apart from causing immediate death and cancerous growths, toxins in certain brands of everyday cleaning

products and laundry detergents, as well as excreted pharmaceutical drugs, have serious and potentially deadly effects on the reproductive, immune and hormonal systems of marine life.

"People used to say the solution to pollution is dilution, that if you dilute it enough, it would go away," said Robie MacDonald, research scientist with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

"That is true for some things ... but the trouble with the contaminants that we've invented over the last 50 years, such as PBDEs, PCBs and POPs, is that they tend to be fat soluble, and they enter in at the bottom of the food web and make their way up."

And, even though PCBs, a particularly persistent organic pollutant, were banned in Canada in the 1970s, they're still showing up in high levels in whales and other marine predators. It will take decades



- 24 hours file photo

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to flush them out of the marine eco-system, and even longer for pollutants that are still entering the ocean, MacDonald says.

The T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, along with the Georgia Strait Alliance, the United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union, and private investigator Doug Chapman, are currently represented by the Sierra Legal Defence Fund in a private charge against the GVRD and the provincial government for poor sewage treatment practices at the Lions Gate Wastewater Treatment Plant in West Vancouver.

The charge alleges the primary treatment plant dumped toxic sewage into Burrard Inlet on at least seven separate days in the last two years, and that the province has been negligent in its responsibility to uphold

protective measures of the Fisheries Act.

"The province, the federal government and the GVRD are aware they have been contravening the Fisheries Act, and nothing's been done," says Christianne Wilhelmson, program co-ordinator at the Georgia Strait Alliance, who argues all sewage plants in the GVRD should have at least secondary treatment to remove not just larger objects, but chemical toxins as well.

"For some reason in British Columbia, we've got a very backward idea about sewage treatment ... If people would just look at the new technologies that are being used in Sweden and Australia and other parts of the world, we can actually turn our waste into a resource, rather than using our ocean as a dumping ground."

-Robyn Stubbs, 24 hours

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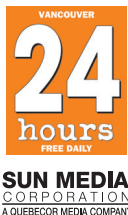
■ The GVRD operates five wastewater treatment plants in Greater Vancouver: Annacis Island, Lulu Island and North West Langley, which provide secondary sewage treatment and Iona and Lions Gate which are primary treatment facilities.

■ Primary treatment, also known as mechanical treatment, filters out oils, grit, sand and solids while secondary treatment removes up to 90 per cent of toxins, including heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants.

■ Stockholm, Sweden, has been turning sewage sludge into biogas to fuel cars for more than a decade, and according to the European Cooperation in the field of Scientific and Technical Research (COST), the renewable fuel doesn't contribute to the CO₂ content in the atmosphere.

- 24 hours news services

Tomorrow, 24 hours takes an in-depth look at the status of a worrisome set of chemicals, polybrominated diphenyl ethers (PBDEs), and how the federal government stacks up when it comes to protecting the public.



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1070 SE Marine Dr.
Vancouver, B.C., V5X 2V4

Publisher
Amber Ogilvie
amber.ogilvie@24hrs.ca

Editor-in-chief
Dean Broughton
dean.broughton@24hrs.ca

Director of Sales
Elena Dunn
elena.dunn@24hrs.ca

CONTACTS

Editorial
Tel: (604) 322-2356
Fax: (604) 322-3026
news@24hrs.ca

Distribution & Reader Services
Philip Tan
van.distribution@24hrs.ca
(604) 322-2353

Advertising

Tel: (604) 322-2371
Fax: (604) 322-3036

PRINTING Quebecor World
Chairman Jim Pattison
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