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The chemical ocean

By ROBYN STUBBS, 24 HOURS

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 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."

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.

YOU SHOULD KNOW

- 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.

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