



MEDIA RELEASE

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BC falling behind rest of Canada in treating sewage

National Sewage Report Card results: Embarrassingly low grades for coastal cities, Victoria suspended

VANCOUVER, BC – A national report card released today reveals that BC coastal communities continue to dump raw sewage into the environment, while more and more communities across Canada and around the world are moving towards more responsible sewage treatment.

In its third “**National Sewage Report Card**” which reviews how Canadian cities are treating their sewage, Sierra Legal, on behalf of the T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, Labour Environmental Alliance Society (LEAS) and Georgia Strait Alliance, reviewed 22 cities to see what changes have occurred since the last report card in 1999. Though communities such as Whistler, Edmonton and Calgary are ahead of the curve in treating their sewage, Vancouver, and in particular Victoria, which continues to dump all its sewage untreated into the Strait of Juan de Fuca, are falling further and further behind. Since Victoria is the only Canadian city in the report that has taken no concrete action to start treating its sewage, the city has been ‘suspended’.

“While communities like Halifax and St John’s have finally recognized that sewage treatment is a necessity, not a luxury, in BC we continue to believe that dumping billions of litres of raw sewage into our waterways does not harm our environment,” says Jim McIsaac of the T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation. “Our waste is our responsibility and to believe that the ocean will clean up the toxic soup we are dumping into it every day is not only naïve, but dangerous.”

Not all BC communities were reviewed in the survey, however the report did highlight how coastal communities are lagging behind inland communities in accepting the impacts of dumping raw sewage into the environment. “We have to stop thinking there is no price to be paid for dumping raw sewage into the ocean,” says Mae Burrows, Executive Director of the Labour Environmental Alliance (LEAS). “Sewage contains toxic chemicals, including PCBs, POPs and PBDEs (fire retardants). With the largest sewage treatment plant in BC – the Iona plant in Vancouver – only providing primary sewage treatment, these toxic chemicals are contaminating our coastal waters and harming the animals that live there, like the endangered southern resident killer whales and harbour seals.”

“The cities with the lowest levels of treatment and that discharge the highest volumes of raw or minimally treated sewage are Victoria, Montreal, St John, Halifax, Charlottetown and St. John’s,” says John Werring of Sierra Legal. “Coincidentally, all six cities discharge their filth directly into our oceans or seaways, polluting them on a scale unparalleled in the modern world. This has got to stop.”

Unlike the United States or the European Union, Canada has no national standards for sewage treatment, which has resulted in this patchwork of sewage treatment. “Just like we need national standards to ensure equal health care access across this country, we need national standards to ensure that the environment and human health are protected nationwide from the harmful impacts of raw sewage and the toxic chemicals it contains”, says Peter Ronald, Marine Habitat Campaign Coordinator of the Georgia Strait Alliance.

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Currently, contamination of waters by sewage falls under the Fisheries Act and the Canadian Environmental Protection Act, which are not enforced or applied equally across Canada. Recently, the cities of Dawson, Yukon and Iqaluit, Nunavut were charged and convicted for ongoing violations of the Fisheries Act, while no charges have been laid against other, larger offending cities like Victoria, Montreal and Halifax.

Copies of the report and media backgrounders for each region are available for download at: www.sierralegal.org. French versions of these materials are also available.

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