

B.C. protests loss of protection program

Closure of office - a victim of federal cuts - will be detrimental to habitats: critic

BY PETER O'NEIL, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 5, 2013

B.C. Environment Minister Terry Lake criticized the federal government Monday over the imminent closure of an office that co-ordinates governmental protection of the Lower Mainland's two most significant aquatic ecosystems, the Fraser River estuary and Burrard Inlet.

The multi-government office, a self-described "pioneer" in intergovernmental co-operation that will close at the end of the month, was set up in 1985 and reviewed 153 development projects in 2011.

Lake said the closure, along with recent federal decisions such as the closure of west coast Canadian Coast Guard facilities like the Kitsilano search-and-rescue station, send the wrong message to British Columbians.

Three federal departments cut roughly \$150,000 from the Burnaby-based office last year, forcing the closure of the \$350,000-a-year operation that was also funded by the B.C. government, Metro Vancouver and Port Metro Vancouver.

Lake complained that Ottawa didn't give him advance warning or allow time for the various levels of government to replace an entity that reviews economic development proposals in the Fraser River Estuary and Burrard Inlet.

"It's a worrisome trend, and I would like to have that conversation with our federal counterparts, because I think it sends the wrong message if we don't have a new plan in place that assures British Columbians that ... development around our marine environment is done in a responsible way," Lake told The Vancouver Sun.

"People in British Columbia need to see you stepping up oversight of marine traffic and marine development rather than reduce resources."

A spokesman for federal Transport Minister Denis Lebel, asked to comment on Friday about the closure, suggested the decision was made collectively.

"This program is run by multiple partners, including the government of British Columbia and Port Metro Vancouver," Mike Winterburn said in an email.

"These partners determined, after a review, that it could not proceed in its current form. Work on a new framework is ongoing, which the federal government will continue to support."

One critic said Friday that the decision, which will put Port Metro Vancouver in charge of environmental approvals on an interim basis, represents the latest step by the Harper government to degrade environmental protection.

"It's again putting the wolf in charge of the sheep (by putting) the developer in charge of the environment," former federal fisheries biologist Otto Langer said in an email.

"This is a certain guarantee to allow more habitat destruction."

Carrie Brown, Port Metro Vancouver's manager of environmental programs, indicated the decision was prompted by federal budget cuts and said the port is only temporarily taking over the work while governments figure out a new approach to it.

The Fraser River Estuary Management Program was established in 1985, and the Burrard Inlet Environmental Action Program in 1991, to limit inter-governmental squabbling over shoreline development proposals.

Since 1996, the two have been jointly administered from a Burnaby office on behalf of its partner organizations - the B.C. Environment Ministry, Metro Vancouver, Environment Canada, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Transport Canada, and Port Metro Vancouver. The office was praised as a model for intergovernmental co-ordination in a 1993 University of B.C. paper published by the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Its objective was to improve water and sediment quality, protect fish and wildlife habitat, and promote ecological health in areas facing significant economic development.

Langer said Friday that the closure, and Port Metro Vancouver's new role in handling development reviews, is part of the Harper government's legislative and budgetary measures to weaken environmental protection.

Port Metro Vancouver came under fire recently from Voters Taking Action on Climate Change, which accused the port of misrepresenting public opposition to the expansion of North Vancouver's Neptune coal terminal.

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