

# Sewage cleanup behind schedule

## Federal government says consultation on new rules taking time

BY MIKE DE SOUZA, POSTMEDIA NEWS JULY 20, 2011

The federal government is behind schedule in delivering promised regulations to crack down on water pollution from municipal sewage systems, briefing notes prepared for Environment Minister Peter Kent have revealed.

A spokeswoman for the minister explained the government is proceeding carefully with consultations to ensure communities can properly protect both their economic and environmental interests as they comply with regulations that would require multibillion dollar investments across the country.

The briefing notes said that the department had received nearly 200 submissions from municipalities and other stakeholders on the regulations which would target an estimated 150 billion litres of sewage released every year into Canada's waterways.

"We're taking the necessary time to process what we heard," said Kent's spokeswoman Melissa Lantsman, in an interview. "It's important that we get [the details] right the first time ... [and] that they provide time for municipalities and communities to meet the baseline standards."

She said the government is aiming to introduce final regulations to crack down on municipal systems by late 2011, more than a year after draft regulations were introduced in March 2010, and behind the schedule set out in briefing notes from Environment Canada bureaucrats delivered to Kent when he took over the environment portfolio in January.

The officials said in the briefing notes that the department was "targeting" the spring of 2011 to publish the final regulations.

"Waste water effluent represents one of the largest sources of pollution, by volume, in Canadian waters," said the briefing notes, released through access to information legislation following a request by the Pembina Institute, an Alberta-based environmental policy research group.

The briefing notes also highlighted numerous impacts of the pollution, domestically and internationally, observed for over 20 years such as negative effects on drinking water, swimming, fish and wildlife populations, as well as commercial fishing industries.

Kent was also told that the standards would allow Canada to catch up to other jurisdictions such as the European Union and the United States, which has required secondary treatment of waste water since the 1970s. In the case of the latter, the briefing notes said the new regulations would "enhance coordination between Canada and the U.S. with respect to transboundary water quality."

Environment Canada estimated in previously released briefing notes from 2006 that cities would need up to \$20 billion over two decades to bring municipal waste water systems up to standard to address threats to environmental and human health, but it now estimates the price tag of its regulations at about \$10 to \$13 billion over 30 years.

The federal government has indicated it would give cities with systems considered to be at high risk about 10 years to meet the regulations, while others at lower levels of risk would have 20 or 30 years to bring their system up to the new standard. But the Federation of Canadian Municipalities has also previously warned the government that new standards could translate into property tax hikes, if there is no new funding from the federal and provincial governments.

"I think what we need to keep in mind is that municipalities in general are facing an infrastructure deficit and challenges in terms of paying for the country's infrastructure, whether it's repairing the existing infrastructure or putting new infrastructure in place as the result of a new requirement," said Berry Vrbanovic, president of the federation and a city councillor from Kitchener, Ont.

"So anything along those lines is going to require that all orders of government pay their share of any infrastructure work that happens."

Some critics have suggested that the federal government's plan has failed to address other sources of water pollution that put the population at risk such as aging septic tanks in rural Canadian communities without sewage systems.

Scott Pearce, mayor of Gore, Que., a small town between Ottawa and Montreal, has unsuccessfully urged the government to also cover the cost of low-interest loans to help rural Canadians and cottage owners replace aging septic tanks.

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun