

Sewer and water upgrades fall short

\$3.1 billion won't address pollution woes

BY MIKE DE SOUZA, POSTMEDIA NEWS JULY 27, 2011

Despite spending as much as \$3.1 billion in recent years to upgrade water and sewage treatment systems, the federal government has acknowledged the investments may not address a multi-billion-dollar price tag for proposed regulations to crack down on water pollution from this infrastructure.

An Infrastructure Canada representative said municipalities using the money were required to build projects based on old standards and not on a new set of draft regulations introduced by Environment Canada in March 2010 that could force cities to spend up to \$20 billion in upgrades over the next two decades.

"Infrastructure Canada does not track funding that has gone specifically toward allowing municipalities to meet the draft waste water system effluent regulations," Jen Powroz wrote in an email. "The standards refer to the existing ones that were in place prior to last year's introduction of draft regulations."

The investments were made through a mix of federal infrastructure programs, including the recent multibillion-dollar fund that was introduced in 2009 to stimulate the economy.

Elected municipal officials from across the country have said they agree with the importance of new standards to crack down on sewage treatment, but they have warned the estimated \$20 billion in costs - in the absence of new funding from the federal or provincial governments - could result in annual tax hikes of up to \$1,000 per household in some communities.

Environment Canada scientists have said the regulations are necessary to address human and environmental health threats resulting from an estimated 150 billion litres of sewage released every year from the systems into Canadian waterways. They have also said that the proposed regulations would bring Canada up to the same standard as other jurisdictions such as the United States and Europe.

The cities have maintained they must have more help - on top of existing multibillion-dollar investments, such as a gas tax revenue sharing program - to cope with the regulations as well as other crumbling infrastructure estimated to require more than \$123 billion in new funding.

Environment Minister Peter Kent was told by his department in briefing notes in January that the final standards were slated to be implemented within six months, but his representative, Melissa Lantsman, has said the government is proceeding carefully on consultations with all of the stakeholders to ensure communities can properly protect both their economic and environmental interests when they comply with the regulations.