

SEWERAGE SYSTEM REGULATION IMPROVEMENT COALITION

For immediate release

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HEALTH COALITION CALLS FOR ACTION ON DOMESTIC SEWERAGE SYSTEMS

BC's laws governing septic systems are in need of urgent reform in order to avoid a Walkerton-type public health disaster.

Today a coalition of health, environmental and shellfish grower organizations called on BC's Ministers of Health Services, Healthy Living & Sport, and Advanced Education to immediately reform the Sewerage System Regulation—the 2005 law that radically deregulated the Province's 300,000 onsite sewerage (septic) systems.

“Careless deregulation triggered the Walkerton and North Battleford health disasters. If we don't fix this failed law, we could see mini-Walkertons all over this province,” said Tim Roark, spokesman for the Sewerage System Regulation Improvement Coalition.

The regulation reversed previous law to allow the construction of domestic sewerage systems less than 100 feet from drinking water sources. It also made BC virtually the only North American jurisdiction that doesn't require a government official to examine a sewerage system before it goes into use. Instead, the new law gave industry the right to regulate itself. The law:

- Institutionalized conflict of interest. Businessmen who sell systems have been given the power to “legalize” the same system, which encourages installation on unsafe lots;
- Caused the cost of systems to skyrocket, as industry was given a monopoly;
- Stripped neighbours of the right to public notice and appeal;
- Stripped health officials of the ability to stop a technically flawed system from being built – even if they suspect it could become a long-term pollution hazard;
- Delegated discipline of the industry to associations, whose disciplinary proceedings are often lax and conducted in secrecy.

“Citizen complaints about this law have been rampant. Health experts and the Union of BC Municipalities agree that this law is a total failure. And government officials themselves are calling it one of the worst health laws in history. This broken law must be fixed immediately,” Roark concluded.

The Coalition [which includes the Public Health Association of BC, Canadian Institute of Public Health Inspectors (BC), and BC Shellfish Growers Association] provided a detailed submission prepared with legal help from UVic Environmental Law Centre. The submission critiques the law, provides vivid case studies of its failures, and makes specific recommendations for legal reform.

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Resources:

PDF versions of the submission available at www.elc.uvic.ca