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ENVIRONMENTAL GROUPS NATIONWIDE DEMAND THAT PARLIAMENT REMOVE ATTACKS ON ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION FROM BUDGET BILL

Vancouver, BC—Proposed Budget bill contains buried provisions that rewrite environmental assessment laws and would allow dangerous projects to go ahead virtually unchecked, environmental groups say.

In a letter sent to MPs today, sixteen environmental groups from across Canada are urging the House of Commons Finance Committee to cut provisions from the 2010 Budget Implementation Bill that would significantly weaken the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* (“CEAA”). CEAA is a vital piece of legislation which requires environmental assessments for development projects including major projects such as tar sands, mines, oil and gas pipelines, and nuclear power plants.

“By burying these significant changes deep within a towering, 900-page budget bill, the government has deliberately sought to hide these changes from public scrutiny, discussion or debate,” says Josh Paterson, staff lawyer at West Coast Environmental Law in Vancouver. “Using the Budget to ram through an attack on laws protecting Canada’s environment is undemocratic. That’s why we’re asking MPs on the Finance Committee to show environmental leadership by cutting these changes out of the Budget.”

The proposed changes will have serious consequences for the way environmental assessment is conducted in Canada. For example, the changes allow the Minister of the Environment to avoid doing detailed environmental assessments on large projects by breaking the projects up into smaller pieces – in a major move that undoes the Supreme Court of Canada’s recent decision that this is illegal under CEAA, and amounts to avoidance of environmental regulations. Because the changes have been included in the Budget, the government is attempting to force MPs to accept the amendments or else trigger an election. Opposition parties have objected to the changes but have yet to commit to action.

“Canada’s environment can’t afford this setback,” said Jamie Kneen, Co-Manager of MiningWatch Canada in Ottawa. “In fact, we need to strengthen environmental laws in Canada, particularly now that Canadians are more conscious than ever about the need for strong environmental protection.”

This action comes in the wake of outcry from environmental groups over the provisions in last year’s budget bill that amended *CEAA regulations* and weakened the *Navigable Waters Protection Act*. The groups are frustrated with the government’s practice of undermining Canada’s environmental assessment laws through the budget process. They believe this is fundamentally undemocratic and is an attempt to avoid Parliament’s scrutiny of changes to environmental assessment, which is planned in the upcoming parliamentary review CEAA, required by law to begin in June.

“These changes are trying an end-run around proper democratic process,” added John Werring, Aquatic Habitat Specialist, Marine and Freshwater Conservation Program at the David Suzuki Foundation. “The upcoming parliamentary review is the best way to update environmental assessment law so that it effectively addresses key priorities that matter to Canadians, such as climate change and environmental protection.”

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Attachment: letter