

Federal Government's Environmental Assessment Agenda Risks Public Health and Safety, Invites Environmental Disaster

VANCOUVER, BRITISH COLUMBIA (February 20, 2012) – Leading public health physicians, environmental lawyers and academics warned today against haphazard federal attempts to undermine environmental reviews for projects like Enbridge's controversial Northern Gateway oil tanker and pipeline plan, cautioning that any government effort to cut corners will put public health and safety at risk.

To evaluate any federal plan to alter environmental reviews, the groups have published a checklist of ten foundational elements that any strong environmental assessment law needs in order to deliver on core Canadian values related to the environment, democracy, and safe and responsible development.

"We can't afford to get these decisions wrong - the whole point of environmental assessment is to protect Canadians and their environment from danger," says Gideon Forman, Executive Director of Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment. "For example, medical studies have shown there are acute health effects from oil spills, and real questions about the implications for long-term health. Weakening environmental reviews might be good for oil companies, but it's not good for the health and safety of Canadian families."

Forman cited a range of studies on the human health effects of oil spills available at <http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/oilspillresponse/studies.html>.

The federal government has indicated its intention to further weaken environmental legislation, possibly including the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* (CEAA), a fundamental law linked to almost 50 other pieces of legislation, including those that protect endangered species and national parks, in order to push through oil pipelines and industrial megaprojects. Of particular concern to the authors of the report is the government's declared wish to dramatically reduce citizens' rights to participate in environmental reviews for major natural resource developments like the Enbridge oil tanker and pipeline project.

"Canadians want strong environmental laws, not a return to bygone days when we rushed projects through no matter what," said Rachel Forbes, a lawyer with West Coast Environmental Law. "We had a century of giving the environment short shrift, where the public and Aboriginal nations had no input at all. That resulted in bad decisions that in many cases have left communities and the environment scarred in ways that could have been avoided. Our checklist provides a guide as to how we can create effective environmental assessment laws and ensure that the best possible decisions are made for communities, the economy and the environment."

Forbes pointed to examples of major hydro dams built in the mid-twentieth century, like BC's Bennett Dam and Manitoba's Churchill River diversion, where there was little if any environmental review, some communities had only days notice that they would be flooded out, and entire river systems were permanently damaged. "It would be a mistake to turn the clock back," she added.

“Experience has shown us that local knowledge and public involvement leads to better long term decision-making,” said Jamie Kneen, Communications and Outreach Coordinator at MiningWatch Canada. “We believe there are efficiencies to be had in doing environmental assessment right, but public participation is critical to identifying projects that make the greatest contribution to a sustainable economy, and putting them in the right place.”

The Checklist for Strong Environmental Laws is authored by West Coast Environmental Law, Ecovision Law, MiningWatch Canada, and Dr. John Sinclair, an independent professor at the University of Manitoba's Natural Resources Institute, and may be found at: <http://wcel.org/resources/publication/checklist-for-strong-environmental-laws>

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