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Harper Breaks First Election Promise

Feds end sewage prosecution despite claim to be 'tough on environmental crime'

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VANCOUVER - Just one month after re-election, Prime Minister Stephen Harper has already broken an election promise, as his government today shut down a sewage prosecution in the same city where he vowed to crack down on environmental crime. The prosecution had alleged that the Iona sewage plant in Richmond, operated by Metro Vancouver and sanctioned by the Province of BC, was violating the federal *Fisheries Act* by sending toxic sewage into salmon-bearing coastal waters.

In 2006, environmental investigator Douglas Chapman, represented by Ecojustice (formerly Sierra Legal Defence Fund), tried to put an end to the pollution by launching a private prosecution against the Province of BC and Metro Vancouver on behalf of three environmental groups: T-Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation, United Fishermen and Allied Workers' Union and Georgia Strait Alliance.

But today, the federal government ordered the Provincial Court to end the prosecution. The federal lawyer declined to give any reasons for the order. The government's order stands in stark contrast to Prime Minister Harper's election campaign promise to crack down on environmental offenders, which he declared in Vancouver on September 24, 2008. At that time, Harper said "If you want a government that is tough on environmental crime, then you should re-elect a government that is tough on crime generally."

Environmental groups say the federal government is being hypocritical. "I am disgusted that the federal government has ended this prosecution. What's the point of the law? Polluters get off scot-free," said Chapman.

Ecojustice staff lawyer Lara Tessaro explained that "the federal government should justify why it is shielding these big polluters from the Court. Instead, it has refused to give the public any reasons."

The primary treatment used at the Iona sewage treatment plant removes only 30 to 40 per cent of suspended solids and oxygen-depleting substances, and fails to remove the majority of heavy metals and persistent organic pollutants - like PCBs. These heavy metals and chemicals bioaccumulate as they move up the food chain, harming salmon, killer whales and a myriad of other vulnerable coastal species.

"At a time when we've lost seven more of our Southern resident orcas, I'm appalled that the federal government isn't willing to stop the pollution of their habitat" said Christianne Wilhelmson of Georgia Strait Alliance. "Sewage is one source of toxic contamination we can fix, but governments aren't doing enough."

"The Iona sewage plant spews toxins straight into the path of a billion juvenile salmon heading out to sea," said David Lane, executive director of T. Buck Suzuki Environmental Foundation. "Metro Vancouver must implement advanced, modern sewage treatment at Iona immediately."

The four organizations now plan to focus their efforts on the upcoming public consultation on Metro Vancouver's new Liquid Waste Management Plan, and continue to urge that it be strengthened.

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