

Sewage treatment time has come

CRD's expert panel review should end debate; risks are clear and monitoring inadequate

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Strip the qualifications and scientific caution from the latest sewage study and the message is clear -- it's time to start serious work on waste treatment.

The review notes it's difficult both to assess the risks in dumping sewage and to weigh the costs and benefits of treatment.

But, it concludes, the time has come to accept the need for waste treatment. "A reasonable case can be made that incurring the expenses of sewage treatment would be prudent public policy in line with the expression of public preferences," the expert panel reports. "Relying on the dilution and natural dispersion processes of the Strait of Juan de Fuca is not a long-term answer to wastewater disposal."

The report, in maddeningly cautious prose, concludes that the risks of all kinds are too great to continue dumping one billion litres of waste each week into the ocean.

Both sides in the sewage debate can find legitimate research to support their claims that sewage treatment is either desperately needed or a waste of money.

But the study notes that it is impossible to be certain that the sewage being poured into the ocean is not doing harm -- to people and to marine life.

That should be enough to establish the need for treatment. We have, as a society, accepted the need to err on the side of caution in deciding on such major environmental issues.

The report also suggests that the Capital Regional District may have been unable to establish a need for treatment because it has been doing an inadequate job of monitoring the effects of untreated sewage.

For example, the CRD tests only once a month for fecal coliform at the Clover Point and Macaulay Point outfalls. That's far too infrequent, the study warns. And it uses an inadequate contamination standard that may understate the health risk.

Even with the poor data, the plume of sewage that regularly rises to the surface poses a potential health risk to anyone exposed to the water, the study found.

The CRD's marine-life monitoring is impressive, the panel found. But "numerous gaps" make it difficult to assess damage.

Most seriously, the study says the "trigger process" which the CRD introduced to provide an early warning that treatment is required is inadequate. It doesn't assess the risk effectively and would not allow introduction of waste treatment in time to avoid environmental damage.

In short, the study makes the case for treatment. The only issue is when work should begin.

How about now? The Harper government has promised money for the project. The province can afford to come up with its share.

And, for a reminder of some of the PR risks of delay, consider the Seattle Post-Intelligencer column this week that told the paper's readers that Victoria "uses an international waterway as a toilet."

There's much work to be done in establishing costs, choosing technologies and -- likely most contentious -- finding the one or two sites that will be needed for sewage plants.

But the debate has gone on long enough. It's time for treatment.

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