

Council of Canadians Statement on the Draft Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulation

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About the Council of Canadians

The Council of Canadians is Canada's largest citizen advocacy organization with members and chapters across the country. The Council of Canadians works to protect the public interest by promoting progressive policies on fair trade, clean water, energy, public health care, and other issues of social and economic concern to Canadians.

Maintaining public ownership and operation of water resources is an important priority for the Council of Canadians. A key component of our national water campaign is to advocate for a national water policy that preserves water as a public resource and enshrines water as a human right.

The Council of Canadians understands that the quality and availability of a community's water supply is linked to its future prosperity and health.

Response to the Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulation

The Council of Canadians supports the establishment of enforceable wastewater effluent regulation, but is concerned about numerous gaps and potentially negative consequences of the proposed wastewater systems effluent regulations.

Public participation

While the Environment ministry claims the regulations are a result of consultation, most communities have not been able to participate in the process of identifying problems and developing appropriate strategies. The Canadian Water and Wastewater Association has pointed out the complex regulations are drafted in a style that is difficult to understand for even the most sophisticated water utilities in the country. As such, local governments and the general public are unlikely to have provided necessary feedback. Furthermore the 60 period granted by the Ministry of Environment is insufficient given the complexity and importance of the issue.

Funding

Funding required for necessary upgrades will fall onto the shoulders of municipalities who are already cash-strapped. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities estimates that Canadian municipalities currently face a water and wastewater infrastructure deficit of \$31 billion. These regulations would raise that deficit considerably, but offers no strategy to increase funding to municipalities for the purpose of improving wastewater infrastructure. The only federal source of funding remains the Building Canada Fund, which is grossly insufficient to meet the basic needs for water and sanitation upgrades, let alone the new requirements of the proposed regulations.

The City of Halifax is expecting a cost of \$ 2 billion for its upgrades alone. The overall costs for affected communities are not yet known.

Capacity

There is currently a shortage of skills in the labour market. Funds will be required to provide additional training for water operators and the hiring of additional staff to participate in the new processes. smaller municipalities, in particular, will not have the capacity or the appropriate resources to meet the new standards. The federal government has not identified a strategy to address the lack of resources in smaller communities, the lack of human resources or the need for training and capacity building.

Risks of privatization

Given the large infrastructure deficit, the Council of Canadians fears that the lack of funding to enable municipalities to meet the standards set by the new regulations will force municipalities to seek alternative sources of funding in the private sector.

Furthermore, the government's regulatory impact analysis statement describes the need to harmonize Canadian wastewater standards with those of the Europe Union. European municipalities are facing financial constraints in meeting EU standards – something that was recently identified in the Global Water Intelligence, a yearly industry report, as an opportunity for investment in wastewater infrastructure.

With Canada currently negotiating a trade deal with the European Union, which has the backing of the French water corporation Suez, the Council of Canadians fears that a lack of adequate funding and capacity building for public wastewater services, will leave the door wide open to European water corporations seeking investments in Canada.

End-of-pipe solutions are insufficient

Regulations targeting wastewater treatment alone, will not address most of the water quality issues faced by communities in Canada. As noted by the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), municipalities do not themselves create the waste. It is generated by institutional, commercial and residential users who are responsible for the pharmaceutical and other products that impact water quality. The AMO therefore calls for a strategy that would enable municipalities to control pollution at source rather than a simple end-of-pipe strategy.

In addition, given that over 20% of our municipalities have faced water shortages over the last few years, a wastewater strategy must include conservation targets aimed at reducing the amount of wastewater currently generated.

Recommendations

The Council of Canadians is calling for a wastewater strategy that will be part of a comprehensive national water policy that recognizes water as a human right and a public resource. Any federal water policy must strengthen and protect public ownership and operation of water and wastewater infrastructure. Given the massive infrastructure deficit faced by Canadian municipalities, the Council of Canadians is calling for a national water and wastewater infrastructure fund that would enable local governments to keep water and wastewater services in public hands. Such a fund must also include training and capacity building for water workers.

Given the vital importance of water and wastewater services, the Council of Canadians is calling for full public consultation and a process to involve Indigenous communities and local governments in developing a strategy to address wastewater treatment needs throughout the country.