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## UVic forum delves into murky - and controversial - world of sewage

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More than 100 people delved deep into the murky scientific, social and political waters of sewage treatment at a free University of Victoria forum Thursday night, hearing presentations from two scientists, an engineer and a public policy expert.

"We're asking the question here as to how we got to where we are, and what the CRD [Capital Regional District] is planning from here," said James Boutilier, president of the non-profit Maritime Awards Society of Canada, which organized the event.

There were, however, no easy answers. And, despite a vigorous question and answer session, no one presented a way around a provincial order to build treatment plants and impending federal legislation that will make treating sewage mandatory for Canadian cities after 2010.

Treating sewage to a secondary standard - which speeds up the biological breakdown of the waste - will remove nutrients from the water that can sometimes cause rapid and destructive algae growth, said Sophia Johannessen, a research scientist who specializes in ocean contaminants at the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' Institute of Ocean Sciences. However, nutrient accumulation is not a problem off Southern Vancouver Island because of the quick-moving ocean waters, she said.

Treating sewage could also cut down harmful pathogens and pharmaceuticals - such as antibiotics and birth control pills found in human waste - which have the potential to alter the biological chemistry of marine life, she said.

But it won't break down the metals, such as copper, lead and zinc. Nor will it break down PCBs, such as flame retardants, which find their way into the waste stream from products we own and consume, said Johannessen. Those toxins will end up in the sludge that becomes the byproduct of the treatment process, and which must then be buried in a landfill or incinerated, she said.

"Secondary treatment does not destroy any of these persistent organic pollutants or metals," she said. "We have them in our houses, we're putting them down the drain. Stopping putting them down the drain is stopping them from going into the environment."

The provincial government ordered the CRD in 2006 to start planning secondary treatment for Greater Victoria's waste. Building up to six treatment plants for the region is expected to cost around \$1.2 billion and lead to a significant tax hike.

About 129 million litres a day of sewage water are currently screened for solid objects and discharged out of underwater ocean outfall pipes off Clover Point in Victoria and Macaulay Point in Esquimalt.

The environmental harm around the outfalls has been a source of numerous studies and reports, the most notable of which was the 2006 MacDonald report

that found pollution in the sediment near the outfall exceeded B.C.'s contaminated site benchmarks. The report set off a firestorm of political activity and pushed B.C. Environment Minister Barry Penner to order treatment.

Like almost every other sewage report, it continued to be analyzed and reinterpreted by advocates for and against treatment at Thursday's forum.

Monitoring the health of sea life such as mussels and worms around the outfalls has shown there is some ecological impact, but it may not translate into major harm to the ecosystem, said Peter Chapman, senior environmental scientist with Golder Associates in Vancouver.

"I'd be more worried close to the shore, frankly, because that's where you have stormwater runoff," said Chapman.

The region's stormwater system, which captures water runoff from homes and streets when it rains, often mixes with the sewage system due to decaying old pipes. During heavy rain, this sewage and rain mixture overflows onto beaches and creeks as the pipes become overwhelmed. The CRD has registered an increasing number of public health and environmental warnings from overflows.

Fixing the region's old decaying pipes should be a higher priority than building treatment plants, Keith Martin, Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca MP, told the crowd while summarizing a series of public forums he's held on the sewage treatment issue.

"All of us want to make sure we are putting the money where it should be," he said.

Rod Dobell, a professor emeritus at UVic's Centre for Global Studies, recapped the various provincial, federal and international laws surrounding ocean pollution. But he said it is the interpretation of those regulations at a local level, and a "never-ending dialogue" of public debate around the issue, that make sewage treatment such an interesting topic of policy analysis.

"The one thing we can be sure of is that these very simple questions we pose about the simple mundane task of managing municipal waste water have no simple answers," he said.

The sewage forum continues at UVic on Friday, with a workshop from those in favour, and opposed, to treatment plants. The session begins at 8:30 a.m. at UVic's Engineering and Computer Science Building, ECS123. Registration costs \$45.

Organizers of the forum say they plan to post a recap of the presentations at [www.maritimeawards.ca](http://www.maritimeawards.ca).

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