

ENVIRONMENTAL MINISTERS WON'T PAY MORE TO HELP STRAIT

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Larry Pynn - Both federal and BC environmental ministers acknowledged on the weekend the daunting pollution problems facing the Strait of Georgia, but neither would commit additional money to solve the problem.

"This ecosystem is clearly under serious threat," federal Environment Minister David Anderson told a Vancouver conference Saturday, referring to air and water pollution and habitat loss resulting from population growth.

"You start looking at the avalanche coming down the hill - the avalanche of human population growth in the Gulf of Georgia. We have enormous problems to face up to, and what we can do is sometimes limited.

The population of the Georgia Basin is expected to surge from 2.9 million to 3.6 million by 2010.

Noting the health effects of air pollution alone, Anderson estimated 25 per cent of all school absences are attributed to asthma and that up to 5,000 premature deaths per year in Canada are associated with air quality problems. Anderson and his provincial counterpart, Joan Sawicki, are under pressure from environmentalists for more habitat acquisitions in the Strait of Georgia to ensure biodiversity, but both ministers agreed money alone won't solve the problem.

"Money is part of it, a big and important part," Anderson said. "But I don't entirely think this is a money issue. It's a question of coordinating, getting the energy of every level of government and private industry as well. A lot can be done through better use of money." The news conference was called to discuss the first year of the cooperative Georgia Basin Ecosystem Initiative, meant to protect key habitat, remedy air and water pollution, and work with communities on stewardship programs. When the initiative was unveiled in December 1998, Ottawa kicked in \$22 million in additional funding over five years, while the province only offered to redeploy existing resources and work with federal officials.

The province's position has not changed. "I am always going to be a strong advocate for money for this ministry," Sawicki said, "But dollars are tight. We can also achieve a great deal by just making efficient use [of resources]...and working closely with other ministries and partners."

Despite a dramatic turn around in Ottawa's financial position - federal budget surplus is estimated at \$95 billion over the next five years - Anderson said he couldn't promise more than the initial \$22 million.

"Is it enough? Probably we'll have to look at it and see whether there's anything more that needs to be done. But people working together is more important."

Asked to rate his own efforts to control pollution, he said: "Everything I do in politics, I always rate myself as an F. Then I try harder.

Among the initiative projects under way in the basin area: the exploration of alternative farming techniques to reduce hog manure filtering into the Abbotsford aquifer; tracing the source of microscopic airborne particles that create smog and haze, the creation of a model sustainable community in Surrey's East Clayton area, studying the effects of urban runoff on aquatic life, and checking for contaminants in the feces of wild mink and river otters.