

Environmental health advocates welcome first federal recognition of right to a healthy environment in bill to better protect Canadians from toxics

Parliament must prioritize modernization of Canadian Environmental Protection Act

PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release

OTTAWA/TRADITIONAL, UNCEDED TERRITORY OF THE ALGONQUIN ANISHNAABEG PEOPLE [April 13, 2021] - Environmental and health groups have welcomed the introduction of [Bill C-28: Strengthening Environmental Protection for a Healthier Canada Act](#) that will modernize Canada's most important environmental law, the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* (CEPA). These groups urge all political parties to prioritize passage of Bill C-28 with improvements.

Bill C-28 includes amendments to CEPA recognizing - for the first time in federal law - the right to a healthy environment . 156 UN member states already recognize this right in law, treaties and constitutions. The recognition of a right to a healthy environment in CEPA is an important step forward. However, the bill should ensure that this right has a positive impact on the lives of everyone in Canada, especially vulnerable populations who have long been denied environmental justice and disproportionately experience cumulative impacts of multiple interacting hazards.

Bill C-28 gives greater authority to the Minister of Environment and Climate Change to prohibit the use of substances of the highest risk, although loopholes if not removed could allow for ongoing use. The Minister must endeavour to look for safer alternatives to dangerous substances.

It is encouraging that the Minister of Environment and Climate Change has committed to a new regulation to require ingredient labelling of everyday products including flame retardants in furniture and the complete disclosure of chemicals in cosmetics and cleaning products. The Minister must commit to adopting this regulation as soon as possible.

Bill C-28 is important as we continue to face the COVID-19 pandemic. A strengthened CEPA will be the backbone of a green and just recovery. Everyone in Canada needs adequate protection from environmental pollution and exposure to toxic chemicals that threaten their health and increase their chances of developing serious illnesses.

All political parties must now make Bill C-28 a political priority. MPs must work together to move this bill into committee for consideration and strengthening amendments as soon as possible. Canadians cannot wait another 21 years to reform Canada's most important environmental law.

CEPA is the legislation that is intended to protect the environment and people in Canada and the environment safe from toxic chemicals, harmful substances, pollution and wastes. This law regulates the release of pollution and the use of toxic chemicals in consumer products – a source of our daily exposure to toxics.

A report from the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development in 2017 recommended sweeping reforms to the law, which dates back to 1999.

Jennifer Beeman, Executive Director, Breast Cancer Action Quebec said: Breast Cancer Action Quebec has been educating on toxic chemicals and their health effects for decades. Citizens know about the very serious health problems like cancers, neurological disorders, reproductive disorders, impacts on the immune system associated with flame retardants in furniture, BPA/BPS in cash receipts and the lining of canned goods, phthalates in air fresheners, dryer sheets, perfumes and cosmetics and now highly toxic PFAS in our water, among many other chemicals. What citizens don't understand is why we have these problems. Our toxics regulatory system has been failing us badly, but the federal government, with this proposed reform, has a real opportunity to protect the health of Canadian citizens and our environment. We need to get this reform right.

Dr. Ojistoh Horn, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment Board Member said: "As a Mohawk physician I understand that the health of my community is connected directly to the health of the land. I have seen the impacts of toxic exposures on Indigenous peoples. CEPA reform based on science and justice is necessary to ensure all people - Indigenous peoples, racialized people, workers - are fully protected from toxic exposures. In the spirit of the Two Row Wampum, this legislation needs to ensure that the voice of the people are listened to when concerns about the health of the environment are made. We physicians are doing everything we can right now to care for our communities during this pandemic. Now that this legislation is announced, we need and expect all parties to do everything you can to ensure that it moves forward quickly and provides proper protection for the health of all people. "

Lisa Gue, senior policy analyst, David Suzuki Foundation, said:

"If passed, Bill C-28 would be the first federal law to recognize the human right to a healthy environment - a long-overdue paradigm shift that will help ensure all people in Canada benefit from environmental protection measures. Too often, pollution and environmental degradation harm vulnerable people and disadvantaged communities disproportionately. Bill C-28 could start to reverse this trend by applying a human rights lens to decision-making under CEPA, and requiring much-needed protections for vulnerable populations."

Tim Gray, Executive Director, Environmental Defence said: "Canadians are exposed to more and more dangerous chemicals every year. They cause cancer, trick our immune and hormone systems and wreak havoc to ecosystems. We all deserve to be protected from these chemicals, in particular those whose race, physiology or economic status means that they have been disproportionately put in harm's way. Strengthening CEPA is our last best chance to put the health of people ahead of the profits of chemical companies."

Dr. Elaine MacDonald, Ecojustice Healthy Communities program director said:

"Ecojustice is pleased to see long-overdue reforms to CEPA introduced in the House of Commons today. We now urge all parties to work together to move this bill through the legislative process and make it law as soon as possible.

For too long, an out-of-date CEPA has left Canadians — often the most vulnerable populations in our society — exposed to dangerous levels of toxic pollution and chemicals. A strong CEPA that enshrines every person in Canada’s right to a healthy environment in federal law will be an essential tool for protecting human health and the environment in the face of 21st-century threats.”

About:

Breast Cancer Action Quebec is a feminist, environmental health organization dedicated to the prevention of breast cancer. In partnership with a wide range of local, regional and national organizations, we work for systemic changes based on social justice principles to prevent breast cancer and a range of diseases in women, with a particular focus on the gendered and racialized dynamics of toxic exposures.

The Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) is a physician-directed non-profit organization working to secure human health by protecting the planet. For further information, visit www.cape.ca.

The **David Suzuki Foundation** (DavidSuzuki.org) is a leading Canadian environmental non-profit organization, founded in 1990. We collaborate with all people in Canada, including government and business, to conserve the environment and find solutions that will create a sustainable Canada through evidence-based research, public engagement and policy work. We operate in English and French, with offices in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal.

ABOUT ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENCE (environmentaldefence.ca): Environmental Defence is a leading Canadian environmental advocacy organization that works with government, industry, and individuals to defend clean water, a safe climate, and healthy communities.

Ecojustice uses the power of the law to defend nature, combat climate change, and fight for a healthy environment. Its strategic, public interest lawsuits and advocacy lead to precedent-setting court decisions and law and policy that deliver lasting solutions to Canada’s most urgent environmental problems. As Canada’s largest environmental law charity, Ecojustice operates offices in Vancouver, Calgary, Toronto, Ottawa, and Halifax.

For more information or to request an interview, please contact:

Catherine Poitras, Breast Cancer Action Quebec, catherine.poitras@acsqc.ca, 438-397-7739

Pamela Daoust, Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment, pamela@cape.ca, 514-267-2589

Brendan Glauser, David Suzuki Foundation, bglauser@davidsuzuki.org, 604-356-8829

Sean O’Shea, Ecojustice, soshea@ecojustice.ca, 416-368-7533 ext. 523

Sarah Jamal, Environmental Defence, sjamal@environmentaldefence.ca, 905-921-7786