



Jonathan Wilkinson

NORTH VANCOUVER'S MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

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Stronger environmental protection long overdue

Odds are, most in North Vancouver would have a tough time telling you what the acronym “CEPA” stands for – even though it plays a fundamental role in our daily lives, protecting the health and safety of our families and the complex web of nature’s ecosystems that sustains us.

Reducing air pollution from vehicles and industry, prohibiting the sale and export of life-threatening asbestos, addressing harmful single-use plastics, banning microbeads from toiletry products and keeping these harmful plastic particles out of our water: none of it could have been done without CEPA - the Canadian Environmental Protection Act (1999).

CEPA, 1999 is Canada’s cornerstone environmental protection legislation. It sets out rules for identifying, regulating and managing toxic substances. It has made it possible for us to reduce our exposure to many chemicals that we cannot see, and that most of us cannot pronounce.

CEPA, 1999 required the Government to screen the nearly 23,000 chemicals in use in Canada, identify those of concern, and implement control actions accordingly. That effort is nearly complete.

But the time is long overdue for a stronger environmental protection law that confronts 21st century dangers with 21st century science.

Much has changed

In the 22 years since the Canadian Environmental Protection Act was last amended, chemicals have become an even bigger part of our daily lives and our economy. In that time, our understanding of the risks associated with some chemicals has also grown, as more scientific information has become available.

We interact with some chemicals and pollutants every day, and exposure to them can disproportionately harm at-risk and marginalized populations the most. This includes Canadians who may be at greater risk of exposure or more susceptible to the effects of chemicals, such as pregnant women, children, the elderly, as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities close to major sources of pollution.

Every Canadian should be able to live their life free from the effects of harmful chemicals and pollutants. Many countries around the world have defined this as a ‘right to a healthy environment,’ and there is a growing consensus here in Canada that we too must act.

Last week, I introduced new legislation to strengthen and modernize CEPA. The proposed new law will provide:

- the right to a healthy environment for Canadians, which sets the stage for evolving stronger standards now and in the future, in line with advances in scientific evidence;
- tougher rules for managing chemicals to better protect Canadians and our environment;
- more protection for the most vulnerable such as children, as well as people in communities with higher levels of pollution;
- tougher rules to reduce environmental impacts of toxic pollution that causes cumulative impacts over time.

Mandatory labelling

In addition, we will bring in mandatory product labelling to clearly identify contents that may cause harm – starting with products we all interact with frequently - cosmetics, household cleaning products and flame retardants in upholstery.

Just as science has compelled and guided action on climate change and COVID-19, so too does science guide our actions on pollution. And the right to a healthy environment provides Canadians with an assurance that their federal government will continue to respond to the evolving scientific evidence about environmental toxins.

Four months ago, the Prime Minister and I announced a strengthened climate plan for Canada as part of our blueprint for a healthy environment and a healthy economy. A modernized CEPA builds on this important work and the successes of the past to better protect Canadians’ health and environment now and into the future. It will provide certainty for industry and deliver a legacy of better health and a cleaner environment for future generations.

Office now open by appointment at

604-775-6333 / Jonathan.Wilkinson@parl.gc.ca

JonathanWilkinson.libparl.ca