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The pollution problem we can't save for a rainy day

By Mark Hume

Stormwater runoff harming the urban landscape, according to new study

When it rains on the West Coast, the last thing most people think is that it's bad for the environment.

But a new study by the Environmental Law Clinic at the University of Victoria makes it clear just how harmful stormwater can be when it washes across an urban landscape.

"When it rains in the capital region, water sweeps over roofs, streets and parking lots, picking up a multitude of pollutants on the urban landscape," the report states. "Storm sewers then convey that tainted water at high speed and volume into sensitive water bodies."

The report describes stormwater runoff as "our biggest water pollution challenge," and says it is responsible for most of the toxic chemicals and fecal contaminants found in local waterways. The document contains a map of Greater Victoria stormwater outfalls that are linked to public-health warnings on beaches and it shows the city is surrounded by them.

In Victoria, signs warning bathers not to go near the water are common in the summer. But what choice do fish have?

Read the report here [Reinventing rainwater management](#)

"Stormwater has helped destroy our once-abundant salmon streams. Its high velocity erodes stream banks. ... and its temperature and toxins kill fish," the report states. Hume 2

The document contains a litany of environmental woes linked to stormwater. It is the chief source of PCB contamination in orcas; it is the main reason why shellfish beds around Victoria are laced with poisons; and it has been responsible for numerous fish kills in small streams over the years.

"All the above problems are the legacy of our obsolete 19th century stormwater management system - a system that fails to respect natural systems and water cycles," states the report, which calls on the capital regional district to dramatically revamp its stormwater system.

The title of the document says it all: *Re-inventing Rainwater Management - A Strategy to Protect Health and Restore Nature in the Capital Region*.

The report calls for a long-term integrated plan that would shift the Greater Victoria region from big pipes that dump directly into waterways to a system that uses natural filtration systems to slowly release water that has been cleansed in the process.

In many areas of North America, local governments are shifting in that direction. The athletes village on False Creek in

Vancouver is a good example: Stormwater there is fed through a series of settling ponds. (False Creek remains heavily polluted, however, because of an antiquated stormwater system still in operation farther up the slope.)

The reports says a capital regional district rainwater commission should be established to pull all the Greater Victoria municipalities together in a united move to revamp rainwater management. It says funding should be provided through a new utility charge to homeowners.

"Just as citizens pay to have water piped to their houses, they would pay to have it piped away. The utility charge can be linked to an equivalent reduction in property taxes," states the report.

"If we act now, our grandchildren will benefit dramatically. They'll be able to walk on beaches free of stormwater fecal contamination ... They will walk along the banks of local urban streams awed by the magic of restored salmon runs. They will harvest shellfish from long-closed shellfish beds," the report says. "We can do all this, but first the leaders of the Capital Regional District must take action and establish a rainwater management strategy."

The report is written by Gordon McGuire, a Dalhousie law graduate, and UVic law students Neil Wyper, Michelle Chan, Adam Campbell, Scott Bernstein and Jill Vivian. They were supervised by law professors Deborah Curran and Calvin Sandborn.

It's an impressive piece of work, which lays out a blueprint for achieving dramatic change in the way rainwater runoff is managed.

Rain should be a blessing, it argues, not a curse.

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