

# Provinces Agree to Harmonization

*Mary Ann Coleman,  
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At a meeting on November 20, 1996 the Environment Ministers from across Canada agreed "in principle" on the National Accord on Harmonization. Each Minister will now take the Accord back to their cabinets for approval. They expect to sign the agreement in May 1997. On the upside for environmentalists, none of the sub-agreements have yet been approved by the Ministers.

Environmentalists have been opposed to the Accord. Just prior to the November 20<sup>th</sup> meeting, a position paper supported by 90 groups from across Canada was released. The paper outlines these 6 recommendations; focus on co-operative action between levels of government (not on delegating authority), provide adequate funding for environmental protection, develop the Canadian Council of Minister's of the Environment (CCME) as a forum for discussion (not a decision-making body), create a public advisory body to the CCME, develop Environmental Bill of Rights legislation and provide more public consultation.

Not long ago it looked like the Accord had died it's final death. Sheila Copps, then Minister of the Environment, had refused to go along with the sections on Environmental Impact Assessment. Then Harmonization got back onto the front burner following Stefan Dion's "unity tour" of the country. At that time, the provinces identified control of environmental issues as a priority.

The newest draft of the Accord qualifies the commitment to achieving the highest level of environmental quality with a reference to within a "context of sustainable development" (ei. economic considerations). This is not surprising given that a number of Canadian Industry associations issued a joint media release that was critical of the use of the phrase "highest level of environmental quality" and asking that the Accord clearly state that improved efficiency and coordination among governments is the goal.

Of interest to New Brunswickers is the fact that our Minister of the Environment did not attend the November 20<sup>th</sup> meeting. New Brunswick's representative was Don Dennison, the Deputy Minister of the Environment.

Environmentalists believe that the Accord will result in a downloading of Federal responsibility in environmental matters to the provinces. This can lead to the development of pollution-havens and a weakening of environmental protection across the country. Presently there are check's and balances in the system, if the provincial government doesn't act concerning an environmental infraction, the federal government still has a mandate to act. Environmentalists are also concerned about the amount of authority that will be vested in the CCME. This would move a large portion of environmental decisions beyond the reach of Parliament, legislatures and the Canadian public.

The NBEN Harmonization Working Group has produced a report on the impacts of Harmonization in New Brunswick and in Atlantic Canada. For copies of the report and the recent national position paper, contact the NBEN office. ~