

Harmonization Accord Signed - Environmental Set-back

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by Mary Ann Coleman

After years of battle and many victories on the environmental side, the Environment Ministers from the provinces and the federal government, except Quebec, signed the Environmental Harmonization Agreement in late January. In advance of the meeting, it was expected that the federal Minister would not sign the Accord, chiefly because of concerns over the federal role in environmental assessment. It is speculated that the provinces were able to sway the federal government by threatening to withhold provincial support for Canada's new international commitments on Climate Change.

In December, the all-party federal Standing Committee on the Environment had recommended that the government not sign this accord without first conducting a comprehensive study to identify gaps, overlap and duplication. During the committee hearings, they did not find sufficient evidence of overlap and duplication in federal environmental protection. Juli Abouchar had presented at those hearing and at the time reported, "The Standing Committee on Environment and Sustainable Development ENGO presentations went well - Martha Kostuch (Friends of the Old Man River) , Berkhard Mausberg (CEDF) and I gave 10 minute presentations followed by questions. The Committee seemed most concerned with the effects of downloading environmental assessment. The hearings will continue through next week. The Committee is pretty much opposed to harmonization. But from casual talk after the hearings, I think they feel that their recs won't carry much weight."

After the Accord was signed, the Youth Action Group sent a joint statement, signed by 12 youth groups, to both governments calling on them to reconsider this decision at the time of the 2-year review. The clause calling for a 2-year review is the good news. The bad news is that Quebec's reluctance to sign was not based on green ethics but rather on their concern that the Accord does not go far enough in transferring power to the provinces. The Canadian Environmental Law Association will continue to carry this torch by launching a law suit against the federal government shortly.