

West Coast Environmental Law

Media Backgrounder



About:

West Coast Environmental Law is a non-profit environmental law and public interest organization, based in Vancouver, British Columbia. We believe in a just and sustainable society where citizens are empowered to protect the environment and environmental protection is enshrined in law. Since 1974, we have been recognized as British Columbia's legal champion for the environment. We fulfill our mission in a variety of ways;

- First, we work to shape existing and future environmental law and policy in British Columbia and Canada. We accomplish this by building coalitions, engaging communities, publishing policy papers, and assisting in the drafting of new legislation.
- Second, we provide legal advice and financial aid grants, through our Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund, to individuals or groups who need to hire legal representation and/or scientific experts to resolve an environmental conflict.
- Third, we track and analyze developments in British Columbian and Canadian environmental policy and distribute this information to the public, through our Environmental Law Alert Blog, monthly Legal e-Brief electronic newsletter, and our Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages.

History:

West Coast Environmental Law was founded in 1974 and is the oldest environmental law organization in British Columbia. We were established to promote the cause of environmental law reform and to empower citizens to bring about progressive change. For over 35 years we have been dedicated to safeguarding the environment through law.

Significant Accomplishments:

West Coast Environmental Law has a lengthy and successful history of influence on environmental legislative reform. We have helped establish and shape many significant environmental legislative initiatives in British Columbia and in Canada. Some of our achievements include;

- Playing a key role in the development of laws requiring the government to evaluate the environmental impacts its decisions, including the *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* and BC's first *Environmental Assessment Act*;
- Spearheading ground-breaking anti-toxins legislation in BC, such as the province's first laws addressing contaminated sites and a requirement to phase out organochlorines from pulp mills;
- Being one of just 3 environmental representatives on Canada's official delegation to Kyoto, Japan to help negotiate the Kyoto Protocol, the landmark climate change treaty;
- Providing legal representation and support to a wide range of high profile and successful environmental campaigns, from the protection of the Great Bear Rainforest to the coalition currently pressing for a legal ban on oil tankers off BC's North Coast;
- Founding the Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund, which for over 20 years has provided environmental legal aid to British Columbians.

Program Areas:

West Coast Environmental Law currently specializes in areas dealing with Aboriginal Law, Climate Change, Energy, Environmental Assessment, Forests and Land Use and Green Communities.

Environmental Legal Aid:

Access to justice is the cornerstone of a civil society. West Coast Environmental Law believes in a democratic society in which those affected by environmental and resource development decisions have a voice. We provide legal information and advice, financial support, and in some cases legal opinions to individuals or groups who need help to resolve an environmental conflict.

Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund:

West Coast Environmental Law provides financial aid grants through the Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund to individuals or groups who need to hire legal representation to resolve an environmental conflict. The Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund is the only source of environmental legal aid in British Columbia and is used to hire lawyers who specialize in environmental law at a legal aid rate. It has allowed recipients to obtain legal advice on a wide range of issues including;

- Pursuing alternative dispute resolutions;
- Appearing before government tribunals;
- Participating in environmental assessments and challenging government decisions in court.

Since the Environmental Dispute Resolution Fund was established, over \$4 million dollars in grants have been provided, helping to support more than 500 legal cases. Some victories include:

- The striking down of BC's fish farm laws as unconstitutional;
- The protection of an endangered caribou herd in a case that rejected the BC Government piecemeal approach to addressing First Nations concerns about endangered and threatened species;
- Persuading Metro Vancouver to drop its plans to build the massive Ashcroft Ranch Landfill on endangered grasslands; and
- The blocking of BC Hydro plans to burn natural gas to power Vancouver Island.

Environmental Law Alert Blog, Legal e-Brief electronic newsletter Facebook, Twitter YouTube:

West Coast Environmental Law sounds the alarm when environmental laws are being weakened or threatened, and provides timely information to British Columbians about significant environmental law developments that affect everyone. We track and analyze developments in British Columbian and Canadian environmental law and policy, and distribute this information to the public, through our Environmental Law Alert Blog, monthly Legal e-Brief electronic newsletter, and our Facebook, Twitter and YouTube pages. We comment on proposed changes to the law that will weaken, or strengthen, environmental protection; stories and situations where existing environmental laws are failing to protect the environment; and emerging legal strategies that could be used to protect the environment. By doing so, we allow citizens to hear both sides on controversial issues.

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