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B.C. metal-recycler fights provincial order to stop polluting

Richmond Steel's Mitchell Island facility handles everything from vehicles and appliances to industrial metals and demolition scrap.

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Richmond Steel Recycling Ltd. PHOTO BY NICK PROCAYLO /00100114A

A Richmond metal-recycling company is fighting the B.C. government over whether it was discharging too much heavy metals and PCBs into the Fraser River.

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Richmond Steel Recycling Ltd., owned by U.S. steel-producing giant Nucor Corp. and Australia-based environmental services conglomerate Sims Ltd., has [appealed an April 2022 provincial order](#) to stop all effluent discharges from its Mitchell Island site to the environment.

A two-week hearing has been set with B.C.'s Environmental Appeal Board [starting at the end of May](#).

"None of the information presented in that (appeal board) proceeding shows that the discharge covered by the pollution abatement order caused any harm to the Fraser River," Richmond Steel environmental health-and-safety regional manager Steven Kynoch said in a written response to Postmedia News questions.

[Richmond Steel's Mitchell Island facility](#) handles everything from vehicles and appliances to industrial metals and demolition scrap. The company says it has B.C.'s only auto/materials shredder and it can recycle 80 per cent of a vehicle.

The [province's pollution stoppage order](#) was issued after testing from the company's own records and the Environment Ministry showed that over a more than two-year period heavy metals such as copper and zinc and PCBs discharged to the environment had exceeded B.C. water quality guidelines. The province noted the company had no authorization to discharge pollutants to the environment, which is required under B.C. law.



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Periodic water run-off from the company's recycling site was directed to a bioswale, a catchment area covered with vegetation meant to filter pollutants, and into a 150-metre-long ditch that empties into the north arm of the Fraser River.

According to testing results of discharge in the ditch and at the ditch outflow at the Fraser River, which were summarized in the province's order, some levels of metals were at least 100 times the province's water quality guidelines and some PCB levels exceeded the guidelines by 10,000 times.

"The usefulness of the environment has been substantially altered or impaired due to the presence of significantly high concentrations of contaminants, including but not limited to, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), metals and total suspended solids," said the province's pollution stoppage order, signed by Daniel Bings, a senior official in the Environment Ministry's compliance and enforcement section.

Just weeks after the order was issued, Richmond Steel appealed, arguing the order was unreasonable and not based on current information. The company also argues the province wrongly concluded the discharge didn't meet water quality guidelines or would continue to fail the guidelines after remedial work.

According to its appeal, the company said it made improvements, and by February 2022, had started using a treatment facility to reduce metal and PCB levels. It was discharging effluent directly to the river because consultants the company hired discovered the bioswale and ditch had become contaminated by the historical accumulation of sediments from the recycling site and those sediments could be carried by stormwater into the Fraser River.

Metals and PCBs can be harmful to humans, animals and fish, and are deemed a probable human carcinogen, according to Environment Canada.

PCBs are a group of manufactured chemicals that were used mainly as coolants and lubricants in transformers, capacitors and other electrical equipment. PCBs have been banned in Canada since 1977, although some equipment that contains PCBs remain in use.




Photo by Environment Ministry staff on Oct. 28, 2022, at Richmond Steel Recycling was included in the MoE's March 7, 2023, inspection report. jpg

[A B.C. Environment Ministry inspection report](#) from Oct. 28, 2022 — published this month on the province’s environmental compliance and enforcement database — showed testing of the treatment facility effluent being discharged from a pipe to the Fraser River exceeded water quality guidelines, including for PCBs.

A fine is being considered because of the inspection results, says the province.

In November 2022 the company secured a permit from Metro Vancouver to discharge the treated effluent into the sewer system.

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to discharge to the Fraser River.

“In the meantime, we are only discharging to the Metro Vancouver sanitary sewer system ...,” said Kynoch.

Metro officials say reporting from Richmond Steel’s own testing show no exceedances to its permit limit. Pollutant levels are the same as the province for PCBs, but Metro allows higher heavy metals levels to be discharged to the sewer system.

In response to Postmedia questions, B.C. Environment Ministry officials noted the effluent directed to the sewer represents the majority of the discharge from the facility, which limits the province’s direct oversight of the effluent.

“Ministry staff have shared their concerns and information with Metro Vancouver and are working to determine if additional compliance actions are required,” David Karn, an Environment Ministry public affairs officer, said in a written response.

Richmond Steel is also appealing the rejection in July last year of its application to the province for a temporary discharge permit. That Environmental Appeal Board hearing is through written submission only, which closes on April 17.

Appeal documents show the company has a plan to remediate the bioswale and ditch by removing and disposing of the accumulated contaminated sediments. The company says it will be costly, about \$3 million.

In its appeal, Richmond Steel also noted that removing an estimated 40,000 cubic metres of stormwater from the facility — equivalent to the volume in 16 Olympic-size swimming pools — would cost more than \$10 million a year.

Initially, Richmond Steel came to the attention of federal officials in December 2019 after stormwater run-off was seen flowing directly from the facility into the Fraser River, bypassing the company’s drainage and treatment works. Testing by federal officials of the effluent showed levels above B.C. water quality guidelines, which resulted in a warning.

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