

Driller licensing provides protection

THE 2000 Walkerton water contamination tragedy became a wake-up call for many Canadians and their local governments. As a result, some provinces such as British Columbia (BC) have introduced new legislation that will license drillers for the first time.

In BC, qualified well drillers and well pump installers must register with the province, under the Ministry of Environment's Ground Water Protection Regulation (GWPR) which includes a grand-parenting provision for those who can demonstrate the equivalent of five years full time experience drilling wells or installing well pumps.

Before the GWPR, there was no regulation in BC focused specifically on ground water protection, standards for well construction or qualifications for drillers: a situation that has contributed to groundwater quality problems in some areas of the province.

Specific to driller training, the GWPR zeros in on the fact that wells and test holes are not always constructed or tested by qualified persons with the knowledge necessary to safeguard drinking water sources and prevent situations where groundwater might be adversely affected.

After the Walkerton deaths, it is clear that efforts are being made to ensure history does not repeat itself, but it must also be ensured this is not just another bureaucratic hoop to be jumped through.

"Licensing drillers can't hurt," said Bill Fitzgerald, general manager for Sonic Drilling Ltd, a contracting company based in the Vancouver area operating a number of sonic rigs supplied by Sonic Drill Corporation. "It will help to ensure that things are done properly. This is important for clients and it's important for the industry as well."

Traditionally, the drilling industry has been self-regulating, allowing most to work their way up from being 'helpers' to drillers, using their natural aptitude and on-the-job training, but that option may become a thing of the past.

Once the GWPR grandfather window closes, new licensing applications in BC will have to show proof of provincial certification as well as three years work experience.

With his fleet of Sonic rigs booked months in advance, Mr. Fitzgerald has managed to get all of his drillers licenced ahead of the closing deadline.

Mr. Fitzgerald said: "Currently, our drillers are required to have training and certification in first aid, Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, dangerous goods transportation and pass a hearing test.

"In addition, we train them extensively on the use of sonic drilling technology no matter how much drilling experience they have. After all that, licensing them seems a reasonable step."



Above left: Workers from Sonic Drilling demonstrate the removal of a core sample extraction from a Sonic drill rig to a group of BC Institute of Technology students. Above right: An instructor from the BC Institute of Technology dissects a core sample extracted using a Sonic drill rig in front of a group of environmental sciences students.