

\$15b waste plan delay by Beijing

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Exclusive by
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CHINESE territorial sensitivity is standing in the way of Hongkong's proposed \$15-billion sewage disposal plan to discharge effluent into the South China Sea.

Approval for a seabed investigation in the sea — earlier granted by China — has now been withdrawn as Beijing takes a closer look at the matter.

Anxious Hongkong Government officials told *The Hongkong Standard* the investigation was vital to confirm or discount worrying earlier findings, which indicated that the seabed structure of the South China Sea may not be strong enough to lay a 37-kilometre marine outfall, a vital part of the disposal plan.

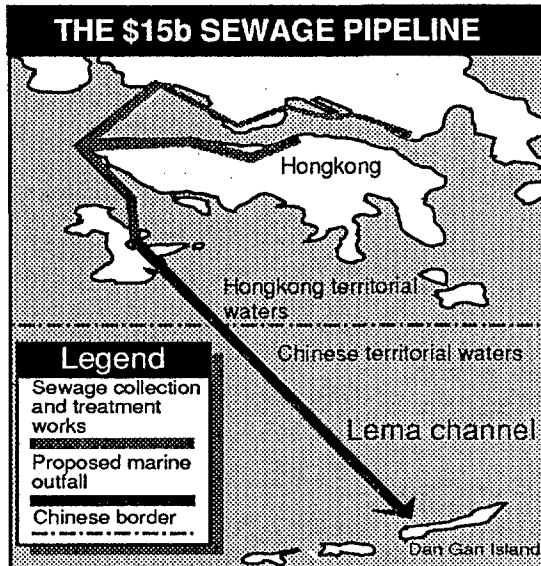
The Government officials said in a worse case scenario the marine outfall at South China Sea would have to be scrapped.

Without the outfall, Hongkong would have to discharge effluent within its own waters and incur costly sewage treatment.

The project's capital cost would soar from \$15 billion to at least \$23 billion and the annual operational cost from \$350 million to at least \$700 million, the officials said.

Government engineers are also worried about any delays of the seabed investigation as it has to be done before typhoon season — which starts in May — to avoid disruption and risks.

THE \$15b SEWAGE PIPELINE



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There appears to be little awareness in Beijing that political stability in Hongkong can only prosper in an atmosphere of mutual respect and a willingness to compromise in the common interest.
— Editorial Page 12

According to Hongkong's plan, sewage generated from both sides of Victoria Harbour would be treated at plants on Stonecutters' Island and Mount Davis.

Following treatment, effluent would be discharged through a 37-kilometre marine outfall, at Lema Channel, north of Dan Gan Island in the South China Sea.

Construction work is scheduled to start next year and the major part of the project will be ready for operation in 1995.

Government sources say China originally gave the go-ahead to the seabed investigation but suddenly withdrew approval in January this year.

According to Government sources, an initial geophysics survey conducted last November by the Government at Lema Channel in the South China Sea appeared far from satisfactory.

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It is understood China did not object to the initial survey because it was on a small scale.

"The survey indicated a geological structure similar to that of a sedimentary basin," government sources said.

"As a sedimentary basin is always associated with marble cavities and faults, we are worried that the structure in Lema

Channel will be of that kind and may not be strong enough to proceed tunnelling as we had planned to," the sources said.

"That's why we need to drill holes 300 metres down the seabed of Lema Channel to confirm the exact structure."

The whole matter is now being studied by China's National Bureau of Oceanography in Beijing.

In a telephone interview with *The Hongkong Standard* Lu Shouben, director of the maritime management and monitoring department under the national bureau, confirmed that China had not approved the proposed seabed investigation.

"Before we give the approval to any seabed investigation in our waters we have to make sure the procedures and equipment to be used conform

to China's rules and regulations," Mr Lu said.

"We cannot say when the approval will be given until all the documents are forwarded to our bureau," Mr Lu said, noting the Beijing bureau had not received formal documents from Hongkong.

Mr Lu also said China had not agreed on the \$15 billion project, whose major part would have to be operational in 1995 to avoid disastrous water

pollution problems incurred otherwise by airport-related reclamation.

Tse Hon-sum, assistant director of the Drainage Services Department in Hongkong, said: "We believe the investigation will start very soon. And we believe China will eventually agree on our plan as we believe the effluent we dispose of will be within acceptable levels set by China," he said.