

Animal rights group to target 2010 Olympics with seal hunt protest

By **Stephanie Levitz**, The Canadian Press Posted Wednesday, February 18, 2009 7:26 PM ET



VANCOUVER - An animal rights group with a controversial flair for the dramatic has linked itself to the 2010 Olympics in the hopes of revitalizing its decades-long campaign against the East Coast seal hunt.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals says that in order for Canada to truly shine during the next Winter Games, it must end the hunt.

"There's never been a better time for Canada to clean up their image by ending the seal kill," said Lindsay Rajt, PETA campaigns manager.

The group has unveiled a campaign featuring the iconic Olympic rings dripping in blood - a campaign aimed largely at the Olympic audience beyond Canada's borders.

Protests connected to the 2010 Winter Games have so far only happened in Canada, but activists claim to be winning worldwide support for their concerns.

The European Union is scheduled to vote in March on banning products that have a connection with cruelty to animals, a ban that could include seal products.

"Hundreds of thousands of these gentle animals have their heads bashed in or are shot, and they are often skinned right in front of their helpless, bellowing mothers," said the release issued Tuesday.

Canadian bureaucrats have been furiously lobbying European politicians for months, trying to counter claims that vilify sealers and portray Canada in a bad light, said Phil Jenkins, a spokesman for the Fisheries Department.

Jenkins said PETA's claims about the hunt are full of errors when it comes to baby seals, and pointed out that it's against marine mammal regulations to hunt nursing seal pups.

"We don't hunt baby seals but rather independent weaned animals and they're not skinned alive," he said, calling the release "maudlin."

It is the first time in PETA's decades-long campaign against the seal

Rajt didn't say whether the timing of the campaign was launched to coincide with the EU vote, but that they intended to make their message heard worldwide.

The organization wants the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee, known as VANOC, and the International Olympic Committee to use their clout to influence the Canadian government to end the hunt.

But the IOC's primary mission is to bring athletes together, not engage in politics, said a statement from spokeswoman Emmanuelle Moreau.

"It is not our role to deal with matters that are not directly linked to the hosting and management of the Games nor to influence - or even take a stance - on issues that are outside of our mandate," she said in an email.

VANOC said there's nothing they can do either.

"While some organizations may use Vancouver 2010 and the Olympic spotlight as a vehicle to make themselves heard on issues unrelated to the Games, we simply have no jurisdiction in this area," said a statement from the committee.

Jack Troake of Twillingate, Nfld., who has been sealing since 1951, said the anti-sealing campaigns aren't based on the truth.

"We've got rules and regulations coming on us now that are unbelievable," he said, adding there's more emphasis on the seal than the safety of the sealer.

Troake, 74, said that while sealers are concerned about a possible EU ban on seal products, PETA's Olympics-linked campaign tactics are pointless.

He said there's no difference between the seal hunt and any other hunt or animal killed for food.

"There's no way you can kill any animal and make it look humane," he said.

PETA's campaign features the 2010 Inukshuk logo with a club raised over its head, and a bloody seal below. Underneath, the five Olympic rings drip with blood.

Rajt said they're not concerned they'll get in trouble for using the copyrighted rings.

Legislation passed in 2007 forbids the commercial use of the rings by anyone but the Olympic committee or its official partners, unless they're being used for criticism or parody.