

What's Wrong with Water in First Nations Communities?

In Landsdowne House First Nation, there have been boil water advisories on and off for the last thirteen years. After six years of being advised to boil their water, Indian Affairs decided that the water system was a danger to residents. Septic systems had flooded basements and sewage may have been leaking into the water supply.

In 2004, the water system was shut down completely because it had been contaminated with gasoline and other chemicals (more than THM's). People couldn't even use boiled water and the school was closed. The system was turned on again when the gasoline was taken out of the water, but the other chemicals have remained ever since. Residents complain that the water gives them rashes and itches, but nothing has been done in the last four years.

Many communities like Landsdowne House tell these stories. The government knows about the situation because the whistle has been blown a few times already. Three years ago, the Auditor General said that even after hundreds of millions were spent, many water systems still "deliver drinking water whose quality or safety is at risk." The Senate looked into the situation last year and said that "this is a situation that no Canadian should tolerate." After claiming that they have spent \$330 million on an action plan, Indian Affairs and Health Canada admitted last December that water systems in many communities are still "inadequate" and "pose undue health risks."

Today Health Canada still tells 95 communities to boil their water and Indian Affairs says that there is a good chance that water systems in another 85 communities could break down. The situation in all of these communities is unacceptable. The problem is even worse than the numbers show. They don't count all the people who can't afford to connect to a water system or who get their water from a lake or river. They also don't count people who get their water from wells, many of which turn out to be contaminated.

The government knows that these problems exist, so why hasn't it solved the problem? There is no simple answer and we will look at potential solutions in this series of articles over the next five weeks.

One reason is that Indian Affairs and Health Canada make the important decisions and say how money should be spent. When water is unsafe, it is also their job to raise the alarm. This is a bit like asking restaurant owners to inspect their own kitchens. When things go wrong, it's embarrassing because it happened on their watch and they have to take the blame. As a result, unsafe water isn't reported as often and aggressively as it should be. How many communities are at risk? Actually, nobody knows. Health Canada has based most of its at risk decisions on determinations of coliforms and chlorine residuals and has made Indian Affairs aware of those determinations. But, in addition to this Health Canada carries out extensive yearly testing, but it has done a poor job informing Indian Affairs about these test results. While Health Canada tests the distribution system it has not routinely tested raw water quality which on paper has been Indian Affairs responsibility.

But, Indian Affairs rarely, if ever, does any of its own testing. It is therefore not possible to know whether treatment systems are effective or not as at a minimum both raw and treated water analyses are required for this. If this was done properly it is likely that a majority of native communities cannot meet the full Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines. The lack of proper testing and enforcement has resulted in a plethora of drinking water treatment plants that cannot produce safe drinking water even when first constructed!

Another reason is that the rules in place are not tough enough or being properly followed. Because the rules were written by government agencies, no one can be punished under the law if they are broken or ignored. The government often doesn't live up to their own standards. In many cases, the rules just aren't strict enough to make sure that water is treated properly.

Finally, it is sometimes just a question of too little money. When a panel of experts asked First Nations, they said this was their number one problem. There is still too little money to build proper water systems, to pay for their maintenance, and to pay operators well so that they stay in communities. If these problems are not fixed, however, more money may be spent on medical treatment when people get sick from drinking unsafe water.

First Nations communities deserve more. The government has not lived up to its promises and has failed in its obligations. First Nations have a constitutional right to live safely on reserves and a human right to safe drinking water. Chief Moonias of Lansdowne House wondered "*how different the response would be if the residents in Toronto were without access to water?*" No one would tolerate that situation and that's the way it should be for all Canadians.

The Safe Drinking Water Foundation believes we need an independent national regulator to guarantee safe drinking water for all First Nation people. SDWF is working hard to make this a reality. We would like to hear your concerns and suggestions, you are welcome to send information to us anonymously and we guarantee we will respect your privacy. If you're interested, please return the attached survey and a member of SDWF's Advanced Aboriginal Water Treatment Team will be happy to call you.

This article includes information from a recent report from the Polaris Institute, Boiling Point, which described the situation in Lansdowne House and five other First Nation communities. If you're interested in the facts and figures in this article, you can find references and more information on our website www.safewater.org under "Policy".