

## **Safe Drinking Water: Now it is in Your Court!**

Four years into Yellow Quill's Boil Water Advisory a rookie environmental health officer (EHO) raised alarm bells about waterborne diseases affecting the Yellow Quill community. The EHO sought help from the Safe Drinking Water Foundation (SDWF).

What we found was a community trying to treat one of the poorest quality source waters not only in Canada, but anywhere in the world. In 5 minutes Yellow Quill was supposed to be able to have this water meet Canadian Water Quality Guidelines. The tools that Yellow Quill had at its disposal couldn't even have made much better quality source water safe for drinking. It had no hope of ever producing safe drinking water!

If you suspect that your community doesn't have the tools to make the water safe ask your water treatment plant operator what his/her treated water reservoir looks like. Is it cleaned every year? Has it got sludge on the bottom? At Yellow Quill yearly cleanings removed one foot of sludge from the reservoir bottoms! When Yellow Quill received its Integrated Biological and Reverse Osmosis Membrane (IBROM) water treatment system in 2004, a quarter was tossed into each of the 3.3 m deep treated water reservoirs. Those quarters are as visible today as they were four years ago with no reservoir cleanings – now that is a good sign of an effective water plant producing truly safe drinking water!

What happens with the chlorine residuals in the distribution system? Do you need to have high residuals at the treatment plant so that you still have some residuals in the distribution system? Take the top off your toilet water tank, what does it look like? If it has a slime layer on the walls, what do you think your community's water lines look like?

Routine testing of chlorine residuals and coliforms doesn't tell you much about your water treatment or whether the water is safe. But, in addition to this testing Health Canada is supposed to do extensive testing once a year or so. Have you seen those tests for your community? Has somebody explained what they mean? Health Canada doesn't always share that test data even with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC), but this is the kind of data that the operator needs, and that Chief and Council need to understand. Without this data, and without data for raw and treated water, how can anybody know if your water treatment plant is working or not?

**Right now Chief and Council are liable for the safety of your drinking water. The federal government is off the hook. You signed contribution agreements that have made that a legal fact. Yet, SDWF estimates that the greater majority of native communities cannot meet the full compliment of the Canadian Drinking Water Quality Guidelines!** Sure, you may meet Health Canada's routine testing of less than 10 percent of the health parameters in the Guidelines. No scientist we know would be able to say if the water is safe from those few tests alone - and that includes Health Canada scientists.

Accepting liability for drinking water safety under these circumstances is a bit like assuming that you only need to check the tire pressures on your grader and you'll be fine. Never mind oil, breaks, hydraulics etc.

But, Chiefs and Councils across Canada are starting to ask questions. Some have written Band Council Resolutions (BCRs) moving safe drinking water liability back to the federal government until they have the tools to produce safe drinking water. The outcome of those resolutions is a sudden strong interest by INAC to fix water treatment plants where Chiefs and Councils have declined to accept responsibility. If you would like help wording a BCR for your community's drinking water, SDWF's Advanced Aboriginal Water Treatment Team members are happy to help you, they have "*been there and done that.*"

Water treatment plants need the proper tools to be able to make drinking water safe. Chiefs and Councils can make Band Council resolutions to ensure that they are not taking full responsibility for drinking water safety until they can actually ensure the safety of their community's drinking water.

In legal terms, that means that you have exercised Due Diligence. If you (Chiefs & Councils) fail to take action and community members get sick from your water, you will not only have to rapidly deal with a water treatment plant that cannot produce safe drinking water, you will have to deal with both health and legal issues that your band simply may not be able to afford.

Chiefs and Councils are elected by the people to protect the health of their people, especially the young and old (who are most susceptible to waterborne illnesses). With the federal government abdicating its responsibility it may be time to establish an **Indian Environmental and Health Protection Agency** that can truly help native communities achieve drinking water safety in a majority (rather than minority) of communities across Canada. This must be about enabling native communities to produce safe drinking water rather than deceitfully transferring liability. The Safe Drinking Water Foundation's Advanced Aboriginal Water Treatment Team is ready to help you make sure you are protecting the health of your community. Complete and return the attached survey and they will be happy to help you.



HansBP Louis Delor Thomas Missens ~~Robert Pratt~~  
~~M.H.H.~~ Margaret O'Connell ~~Pratt~~ Robert Pratt

**CALL TO ACTION FOR First Nations Drinking Water**

Name of community: \_\_\_\_\_

I wish to remain anonymous Yes **or**

Contact person: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_ Fax #: \_\_\_\_\_

Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

1) Do you treat ground or surface water? \_\_\_\_\_

2) What treatment process do you use, can you describe it?  
\_\_\_\_\_

3) How much water do you treat per day? \_\_\_\_\_

4) Do you have support when problems arise? Yes or No please explain  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

5) Who do you answer to when there are problems? eg. a committee or Chief & Council  
\_\_\_\_\_

6) How many people do you service with water? \_\_\_\_\_

7) Do you have an adequate supply amount of water for your community? Yes or No

8) What are the total and free chlorine levels in your distributed water?  
a) Does it vary within the same close range? \_\_\_\_\_  
b) Free chlorine: \_\_\_\_\_  
c) Total chlorine: \_\_\_\_\_

9) What are the chlorine residuals in the distribution system?  
\_\_\_\_\_

10) Have you had any boil water advisories? Yes or No  
a) If yes why was it called? \_\_\_\_\_  
b) How was it resolved? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
c) How long did it last? \_\_\_\_\_

11) Do you measure turbidity? Yes or No  
a) What are the average levels? \_\_\_\_\_

12) Do you drink your water? Yes or No  
a) If so how does it taste? \_\_\_\_\_  
b) Does it carry an odor? Explain if it does. \_\_\_\_\_

13) Does the raw water have any smell? \_\_\_\_\_

14) Do you have raw water data?

\_\_\_\_\_

15) Do you have treated water data?

\_\_\_\_\_

16) Are you willing to share some of the data with SDWF's Advanced Aboriginal Water Treatment Team (AAWTT)? \_\_\_\_\_

17) Do you want a scientist to have a look at the data and get back to you with his/her interpretation? Circle Yes or No

18) Do you have any health concerns for your community when it comes to the water?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

19) Is there anyone from outside the community that tests your water? Circle Yes or No  
If so who? For example EHO, or water quality monitor.

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you test your water on all the water quality parameters yearly? ie: iron, arsenic, etc.  
Circle Yes or No

If so are you willing to share your results with SDWF's AAWTT?  
Circle Yes or No

20) Do you know what your annual bill is for chemicals for your water treatment process  
\$ \_\_\_\_\_

21) How long has it been since INAC allocated any funding to improve or replace your water treatment plant? Please Circle

Less than 5 years          5 – 10 years          over 10 years

22) How much did INAC spend on your community water treatment? \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Any comments:

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

I have forwarded the information you have sent regarding First Nations Call to Action for Safe Drinking Water to our Chief and Council          Yes or No