

Tansi Friends,

We think you may like to read this article which was published in many of our national and provincial newspapers last week.

The Ottawa Citizen

1 in 3 natives says water on reserves isn't safe to drink; Findings come after government spends \$1.6B to improve quality

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Section: News

Byline: Don Butler

Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Illustrations: Photo: Tyler Anderson, The National Post / David Friday takes a drink of bottled water at the Kashechewan Reserve in northern Ontario. Residents of the small reserve, about 400 kilometres north of Timmins, were forced to flee in 2005 after their water supply became contaminated with E. coli.

Photo: Tyler Anderson, The National Post / Garbage and scrap metal littered the yards of most homes on the Kashechewan Reserve in 2005. Earl Commanda, a water expert with the Assembly of First Nations, said 'It wouldn't take very much for those medium (risk communities) to become high-risk communities.'

Despite government programs that have poured \$1.6 billion into First Nations water systems since 2003, more than one-third of those who live on reserves still believe their water is unsafe to drink.

The finding comes from a survey of 1,502 First Nations residents conducted last summer by Ekos for Health Canada. The survey was recently posted on a Library and Archives Canada website.

The Ekos study was commissioned to see whether reserve residents perceive an improvement in their water since the federal government's First Nations Water Management Strategy was launched in 2003 -- two years before the crisis at Ontario's Kashechewan reserve catapulted the problems to national attention. By the time it ends in March, the five-year federal program will have pumped \$600 million into improving the quality of water in First Nations communities. That's over and above \$1 billion in normal spending on water initiatives by Indian and Northern Affairs during the same period.

In addition, the Harper government announced its own plan in March 2006. It identified 21 communities for priority action and put greater emphasis on the training and oversight of First Nations water system operators.

In a speech last month, Chuck Strahl, the minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, boasted that the government's efforts are bearing fruit.

The number of aboriginal communities with high-risk water systems has been cut to 97 from almost 200 in March 2006, Mr. Strahl told the Assembly of First Nations. High-risk systems are deficient in most, if not all, of the five criteria used to assess risk.

As well, 51 per cent of First Nations communities now have qualified water system operators, compared communities with drinking water advisories.

Though the government has reduced the number of high-risk communities, Mr. Commanda said it needs to start focusing on the more than 300 First Nations communities whose water systems have been classified as medium risk.

"It wouldn't take very much for those medium risks

with just eight per cent in March 2006, he said.

And water problems in seven of the 21 high-priority communities have been addressed, the government says. There are about 755 community water systems on reserves in Canada.

The Ekos survey, dated August 2007, suggests many First Nations residents aren't convinced that things are improving.

Just 44 per cent rate the quality of their drinking water as good, and a further 22 per cent rate it as moderate. Fully a third describe it as poor. Those numbers haven't changed since 2005.

One in four reserve residents believes their tap water is very safe and another 35 per cent say it is somewhat safe. But 20 per cent say it is somewhat unsafe and 16 per cent say it is very unsafe. Only 63 per cent say they drink their tap water.

When asked to compare their current water to that of five years ago, 41 per cent say it has improved.

Nearly one in four, however, think it has worsened. The rest report no change.

The survey's margin of error is plus or minus 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20.

Earl Commanda, a water expert with the Assembly of First Nations, said the Ekos survey is "a good indicator of just what people feel about their water systems."

In many communities, he said, boil-water advisories are still a reality. As of Dec. 28, 93 First Nations communities were under a Health Canada drinking water advisory, which includes "boil water" and "do not drink" advisories. That's nearly one in six.

The number of advisories fluctuates, though some have been in place for a decade or more. In March 2006, for example, there were 79 First Nations. The water has been fine ever since. "They're producing absolutely beautiful water," said Mr. Peterson, who has spent a decade working with First Nations to solve water problems. The system has since been expanded to two Alberta reserves.

In recent years, Mr. Peterson said, the government has emphasized training water system operators in

to become high-risk communities."

David Schindler, the Killam Memorial professor of ecology at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, said the government needs to embrace more creative solutions.

Its standard response, he said, is to heavily chlorinate water supplies. But native people often won't drink chlorinated water because it tastes bad and some fear it will give them bladder cancer.

He points to a reverse osmosis system developed by Hans Peterson, executive director of the Saskatoon-based Safe Drinking Water Foundation.

The system, pioneered at the Yellow Quill First Nation in Saskatchewan, uses a biological pre-filter to eliminate compounds that quickly clog conventional reverse osmosis filters.

Yellow Quill, which has "an incredibly lousy ground water source," said Mr. Peterson, was under a boil-water advisory for nine years prior to fully deploying the system in 2004.

First Nations communities. But too often the water treatment plants themselves are inadequate, he said.

"The basic problem is that you have a lot of water treatment plants that simply don't have the tools to produce safe water. Until the operators get those tools, the community, and the operators themselves, will have very little faith that they're producing water that safe to drink."

Even new treatment plants often fall short of the necessary standard, Mr. Peterson said.

"They go out and put up whatever shoddy thing they can," he said, recalling one recently constructed plant he visited that was "like a dog's breakfast."

Mr. Peterson said native people have "stepped up to the plate and got a lot of people trained. But if they have the wrong tools, they still can't produce safe drinking water.

"So now it's really back in the government's lap. To move further now, we need better systems."

Ēkosi Pitamā,



Hans Peterson Louis Delor Thomas Missens
M. J. H. M. D. G. R. Robert Pratt