

## The Boil Water Advisory Quest

When Canadians are asked about the quality of their drinking water, they are often asked if they are confident that their water is safe and that it has been adequately treated. But do Canadians really have all the information to make an informed decision about whether their water is safe or not? When it comes to drinking water in Canada, everyone has an opinion. Following the much publicized Walkerton and North Battleford outbreaks, many people lost confidence in our water supply and turned to purchasing bottled water. Then there are those who have been drinking nothing but well water for years, and swear they have never had problems with it. But what is really going on with our drinking water in this country and what information is available for the concerned public?

As a summer student working for the Safe Drinking Water Foundation in Saskatchewan, I was given the task at the beginning of the summer to seek out as much information as I could find on Boil Water Advisories issued in Canada for the last 5 years. We were interested in seeing whether there was a general increase in the numbers called since Walkerton. It seemed like a fairly simple task. I had heard of Boil Water Advisories before and figured that, following Walkerton and North Battleford, those in charge of issuing the advisories would have them well publicized. But let's take a step back for a moment.

What are Boil Water Advisories and why are they issued? A Boil Water Advisory is a public warning stating that the water supplying a specific location may be unsafe for consumption. This means that prior to drinking, cooking, or even brushing your teeth, the water must be brought to a rolling boil for a specified amount of time, generally for at least 1 minute. The advisories are issued for a number of different reasons. Often they are called in the event of water line breaks or water plant maintenance and repair and are issued just to be on the safe side in case of accidental contamination. Following the repair of the line or when the plant is operational again, the water is tested and the advisory is usually lifted. These advisories are sometimes referred to as Precautionary Drinking Water Advisories. The more serious boil water orders are issued in the event of a water sample testing positive for biological, physical, or chemical contaminants. Examples would be if the coliform count exceeds provincial standards, or if the turbidity levels are too high. These orders are issued when there is a confirmed problem with the water that could pose as a health concern to those consuming it.

So where should one begin looking for this sort of information? From what I was initially able to determine, it was the responsibility of the health authorities to issue all Boil Water Advisories and follow up to make sure the problem is rectified. I felt that the very best place to start would be Health Canada. Surely they would keep a comprehensive, publicly accessible database of all Boil Water Advisories issued in the country so one could find out prior to traveling or moving anywhere in Canada, the status of that communities drinking water. Much to my shock and disappointment, I was unable to locate any database which would alert Canadians if the water in their community was potentially dangerous to their health. Well, I thought, perhaps they have the information available somewhere else other than the website. I mean, this is the government agency primarily concerned with the health of Canadians. They must know something about water advisories, right? Over the next two months, I would place over 10 phone calls and send endless E-Mails to Health Canada asking about where I could access a list of previous and current Boil Water Advisories. As of today, I have yet to receive a reply.

Never one to be daunted by a difficult task, I pushed on and decided to contact the individual provincial health authorities, as my research had indicated that they are the ones in charge of actually issuing the advisories. I began on the East coast and, purely by chance, went to the Newfoundland/Labrador website first. Here I found a nicely designed table of all Boil Water Advisories issued by the province. The table included historical and current advisories, the community names in which they were issued, and the dates issued and lifted. It was also updated regularly and was easily accessible to anyone who wanted it look at it. While I was still getting over my disappointment in Health Canada, I felt I had been vindicated and that in no time at all, I would track down the remaining provinces lists and be able to provide a single, cumulative source of Boil Water Advisories for all Canadians. Looking back, it was unfortunate that I had chosen to look for the Newfoundland advisories first as it gave me a false sense of security. It made me think that all provinces must be as responsible and caring about the health information their residents received. However, I moved on to other provinces and territories and repeatedly found that my efforts were for naught. I got my hopes up again when I ran across a

Saskatchewan website called SaskH2O, which keeps an updated list of advisories that are currently in effect in the province. Although it didn't have any historical advisories, it was still better than what I was finding elsewhere. I decided I would call those in charge of maintaining and updating the site for the historical data I was requesting. Unfortunately, I discovered that, not only did they not have the historical information available for the website, they did not have it at all. I was informed that once an advisory was lifted, the information was simply removed from the database, never to be seen again. Perhaps if better records are kept, I thought, the proper authorities would be alerted if there are communities that repeatedly experience problems with their water.

And so it went on. In Alberta, I was told that I would have to contact each individual health region separately, of which there were now 9, but had been 15 last year. The health regions in Alberta had been amalgamated and after contacting several of the regions, it was apparent that most of their records were in a complete state of disarray. The state of the other provinces records were hardly any better. I began searching website after website, leaving endless voicemails and E-Mails for anyone remotely connected with drinking water issues, and getting transferred from one government agency to another. There appeared to be a complete lack of responsibility for these and other water issues by certain provincial authorities, despite the fact that water plant operators are provincially trained and certified. In some provinces, I was required to go through Environment and Labor Departments, while in others I had to contact Regional Health Authorities. No one provincial department appeared to be solely in charge of the quality of our drinking water and that seems to be resulting in a confusion that is leaving Canadian residents in danger. Finally, after harassing everyone I could think of, small bits of information began trickling in.

Far from the week long task I had originally envisioned, it has now been two months and thus far, I have received lists from Newfoundland, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan (only current advisories), and Nunavut. Also, I have recently been informed by health authorities in Alberta that they will try to compile a list of all provincial advisories so I no longer need to try to contact each individual region. I am now left feeling frustrated and disappointed in the lack of attention our government agencies are giving to something as important as our drinking water. I had expected better of our government, especially following the outbreaks of waterborne illness in Walkerton, Ontario and North Battleford, Saskatchewan. I wonder whether these and other illness outbreaks couldn't have been prevented if there had been a greater public awareness about the state of their drinking water. Interestingly, there have documented cases in British Columbia, Saskatchewan, and Quebec where entire communities have been vaccinated against Hepatitis A, a waterborne viral illness, due to an increased risk in that specific location. In all cases, there were no boil water advisories called and individuals passing through or vacationing in the area would have no protection against the illness. Furthermore, they would have no indication they were potentially at risk. It is therefore critical that we keep in mind that just because there is no formal advisory in effect, there may still be public health risks associated with the drinking water.

It has become increasingly apparent to me that we require federally regulated water laws that would ensure that the quality of water available in B.C is the same as that in Newfoundland and that monitoring of water quality and public notification follow the same process nationwide. I feel that it is unacceptable in this country that we do not have an easily accessible database of Boil Water Advisories and other vitally important health information and I say shame on Health Canada and many other provincial health and environment agencies for forgetting what the primary goal of your organizations are, the health and wellbeing of Canadians. Perhaps then, when someone asks whether we are confident in our water quality, we could make an informed decision.

*Summer Student, Safe Drinking Water Foundation*

**Contact your local Health and Environment authorities to demand better attention to our water quality and health information.**

**Prince Edward Island**

Drinking Water Strategy  
Phone: 1.866.368.5044  
E-mail. [www.gov.pe.ca/fae](http://www.gov.pe.ca/fae)

Department of Health and Social Services -  
Health Informatics  
Phone. 902.368.6158

**New Brunswick**

Department of Environment and Local Government  
Phone. 506.453.2690  
Website. [www.gnb.ca/public/info-e.asp](http://www.gnb.ca/public/info-e.asp)

New Brunswick Health and Wellness  
Phone. 506.453.2536

**Newfoundland and Labrador**

Department of Environment and Conservation –  
Water Resources Management  
Phone. 709.729.2563  
Website. [www.gov.nf.ca/env/ENV/water\\_resources.asp](http://www.gov.nf.ca/env/ENV/water_resources.asp)  
*See boil water advisory for list of current and previously lifted BWA's*

Health and Community Services  
Phone. 709.752.4800  
E-mail. [info@hcssjr.nf.ca](mailto:info@hcssjr.nf.ca)

**Nova Scotia**

Department of Environment and Labor –  
Water and Wastewater  
Phone. 1.877.9enviro  
Website. [www.gov.ns.ca/enla/water/index.html](http://www.gov.ns.ca/enla/water/index.html)

Nova Scotia Environmental Health –  
Public Health  
Phone. 902.481.5800  
E-mail. [info@phans.ca](mailto:info@phans.ca)

**Quebec**

Environment Quebec  
Phone. 1.800.561.1616  
Website. [www.menv.gouv.qc.ca/eau/potable/index-en.htm](http://www.menv.gouv.qc.ca/eau/potable/index-en.htm)  
E-mail. [info@menv.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:info@menv.gouv.qc.ca)

Ministry of Health and Social Services (MSSS)  
Phone. 418.266.7005  
E-mail. [info@msss.gouv.qc.ca](mailto:info@msss.gouv.qc.ca)

**Ontario**

Ministry of the Environment –  
Drinking Water Management Division  
Phone. 1.800.565.4923  
See Website for Adverse Water Quality Incident Reports:  
[www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/adverse/adversewater.htm](http://www.ene.gov.on.ca/envision/adverse/adversewater.htm)

**Manitoba**

Manitoba Conservation – Water Stewardship Branch  
- Office of Drinking Water  
Phone. 204.945.5762  
Website. [www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/watres/index.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/conservation/watres/index.html)

Office of Chief Medical Officer of Health  
Phone. 204.788.6666  
Fax. 204.948.2204

**Saskatchewan**

See Saskh20 website for advisories currently in effect  
[www.saskh2o.ca/advisories/currently%20%20In%20Effect.pdf](http://www.saskh2o.ca/advisories/currently%20%20In%20Effect.pdf)

Public Health Services – Safe Communities  
Phone. 306.655.4620  
E-mail. [Dwayne.djkowich@saskatoonhealthregion.ca](mailto:Dwayne.djkowich@saskatoonhealthregion.ca)

**Alberta**

Alberta Environmental Information Centre  
Phone. 780.427.2700  
E-mail. [env.infocent@gov.ab.ca](mailto:env.infocent@gov.ab.ca)

Alberta Health – Kevin McLeod  
Phone. 780.427.8118

### **British Columbia**

Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection –  
Drinking Water Program  
Search Province of B.C website for Ministry  
Website. [www.gov.bc.ca](http://www.gov.bc.ca)

Health and Health Services –  
Provincial Health Services Authority  
Phone. 604.675.7400  
E-mail. [hlth.library@gems9.gov.bc.ca](mailto:hlth.library@gems9.gov.bc.ca)

### **Northwest Territories**

Environmental Health-Drinking Water Quality-Water  
and Sanitation Division  
Phone. 867.920.6142

NWT Health and Social Services  
Chief Environmental Health Officer –  
Duane Fleming  
Phone. 867.920.3293  
E-mail. [Duane\\_Fleming@gov.nt.ca](mailto:Duane_Fleming@gov.nt.ca)

### **Nunavut**

Nunavut Dept. of Health and Social Services  
Phone. 867.975.5761

### **Yukon Territory**

Health and Social Services  
Phone. 867.667.3673  
E-mail. [hss@gov.yk.ca](mailto:hss@gov.yk.ca)

Yukon Environmental Health  
Phone. 867.667.8391  
E-mail. [environmental.health@gov.yk.ca](mailto:environmental.health@gov.yk.ca)