



NESKANTAGA PUBLIC WATER SYSTEM – BACKGROUND ASSESSMENT

Information for the Ontario Regional Director General

DATE: 26 November 2018

SUMMARY

- The Neskantaga First Nation has been under a Boil Water Advisory since 1995 due to “equipment malfunction”.
- The relatively remote nature of Neskantaga First Nation leads to higher transportation costs. There is a winter road and there are fly-in services.
- The Neskantaga Public Water System is in need of upgrades, renovations, and improvements. The process is expected to be complete in March 2019.
- In summer 2017 it was thought that the boil water advisory in Neskantaga First Nation would end in late spring 2018. However, now the Neskantaga First Nation Community is hopeful that the boil water advisory will be lifted by the end of March 2019.

BACKGROUND

Neskantaga First Nation was formerly known as Lansdowne House Indian Band. It is under the governance of Matawa First Nations Tribal Council.

The Neskantaga First Nation has been under a Boil Water Advisory since 1995 due to “equipment malfunction”. The existing public water system was built in 1993, but only two years later, it broke down. Therefore, the water could be contaminated with bacteria, viruses, or parasites. Piped water is “yellow-ish”, a reverse osmosis system is available to residents but is not connected to the community’s water mains, and bottled water is flown in when necessary. Most First Nation members get their drinking water by going to the water plant to get water from the reverse osmosis system or by boiling the tap water before drinking it.

The Boil Water Advisory was supposed to be lifted during spring 2018. However, the construction company had to bring in a new cement mixer, which had to be taken apart and sent by air, because the community’s mixer did not work. The new cement mixer had to be re-assembled and then tested before any pouring for the project could begin. In addition, there were issues with excavators needing repairs, design problems with the roof, and a delay in the availability of a construction camp.



CONSIDERATIONS

The Neskantaga First Nation is a remote community that is only accessible by a winter road or air.

Road access depends on the season. Water treatment plants depend on capital equipment to function properly and mobilization of materials is tied to the winter road. Gordon Heslov, operations manager for Kingdom Construction (the company that will be building Neskantaga First Nation's new water treatment plant), says the project has faced logistical and equipment problems, but could be completed early in the new year.

There needs to be a focus on human capital investments concurrent with investments in physical capital.

Funding for operations and management continues to be an issue for the Neskantaga First Nation's drinking water system. The Circuit Rider Training Program launched by Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada provides First Nation operators with hands-on training on how to operate, service, and maintain the water and wastewater systems in their community, but only funds 80 percent of the program's management costs. The total budgeted estimate for operations and management is insufficient to properly retain qualified water treatment operators.

Public Health Impact

The lack of hope in the future has caused significant psychological strain on the residents of the First Nation. There is major concern regarding youth suicide rates.

NEXT STEPS

Neskantaga First Nation's water treatment plant is currently being constructed. The Boil Water Advisory is expected to be lifted in March 2019. Kingdom Construction has been hired.

Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada and the Neskantaga First Nation have conducted numerous meetings during the development of this project and these meetings will continue through the project. The Neskantaga First Nation, however, will have no capacity to implement its own infrastructure projects in the future unless it is able to raise its own source of revenue.

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