

## Despite federal promises, First Nations' water problems persist

A year after the federal Conservative government promised to draft drinking water standards for First Nations communities, there is still no bill before the House of Commons — and boil-water advisories remain in place on more than 90 Canadian reserves. Unlike their “do not consume” cousins, boiled-water advisories allow tap water to be consumed for drinking and other uses like brushing teeth, provided it is first boiled.

“The promise of legislation to allow for regulation of water quality on Indian reserves has been made, but nothing has happened,” says Harry Swain, who chaired the Expert Panel on Safe Drinking Water for First Nations.

“There are 2 plausible explanations: (a) that this is not a high priority for a minority government, or (b) that it’s far more difficult than they thought,” says Swain. He called the second explanation “the more charitable one.”

In his 2007 budget speech, Finance Minister Jim Flaherty said “All Canadians deserve clean, safe drinking water”

and promised action. “We will provide a tough regulatory regime and standards for drinking water on First Nations reserves,” he told Parliament.

In a subsequent progress report on the government’s Plan of Action for Drinking Water in First Nations Communities, Indian Affairs promised that its minister “will choose a regulatory option and propose an appropriate regulatory framework that will ensure safe drinking water in First Nations communities in the spring of 2007.”

As of Feb. 29, 2008, there were 93 First Nations communities living under either boil-water advisories or “Do Not Consume” orders ([www.cmaj.ca/content/cgi/full/178/8/985/DC1](http://www.cmaj.ca/content/cgi/full/178/8/985/DC1)). Some have been living under them for years, like the 282 residents of the Neskantanga First Nation in Northwestern Ontario, who were issued an advisory in 1995.

Swain, a former deputy minister of the (then) Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, says the federal government has made progress in improving treatment systems and water quality on reserves. In March 2006, 193 First Nations communities were identified as having high-risk drinking water systems; that number now stands at 85, according to an Indian and Northern Affairs Canada re-

port issued Jan. 17, 2008. Such high-risk communities are typically under boil-water advisories and typically have major infrastructure problems. Not all boil-water advisories, though, stem from endemic structural flaws in water systems. They can be related to temporary equipment or transitory chlorination problems.

Of 21 communities identified as priorities a year ago, 8 have been removed from that category, the report states. In addition, the federal government has instituted a Circuit Rider Training Program to certify water system operators. Now 475 of 1 152 water system operators and back-up operators (41%) are trained to the first level of certification.

But the \$330 million allocated in the 2008 budget over 2 years is not enough to ensure access to safe drinking water in all First Nations communities, many of which require new or upgraded infrastructure as well as training and certification, says Swain. He calls the 2008 budget “a missed opportunity.”

“There really has been a concerted effort by several governments over the last 12 years to get this problem solved. They’re real close. They should in my view allocate the money to get it done,” he says. Swain, now a research associate with the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, estimated it will take “a few hundred million dollars” more to ensure safe drinking water in all of Canada’s approximately 600 First Nations communities.

The panel Swain chaired was struck after about 1000 members of the Kasechewan First Nation in Northern Ontario were evacuated in 2005, after local physician Dr. Murray Trussler and band officials raised alarms about their community’s water quality. At that time, the community had been under a boil-water advisory for 9 years.

The Minister of Indian and Northern Affairs will undertake consultations with First Nations and provinces and territories to develop a regulatory regime for drinking water, says Patricia Vallado, a spokesman for the Department.

“But at this point I don’t have a timeline on the legislation,” she adds. — Laura Eggertson, Ottawa, Ont.



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Some 93 First Nations communities live with boil-water advisories or “Do Not Consume” orders. An expert says the \$300 million earmarked in the 2008 budget for solving the problem isn’t sufficient.

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