

## Some of us still without safe water: Report

BY MIKE DE SOUZA, CANWEST NEWS SERVICE MAY 17, 2010



A truck from the Ontario Clean Water Agency is seen in front of the water tower in the town of Walkerton, Ontario in May 2000.

**Photograph by:** Carlo Allegri, National Post

OTTAWA — Ten years after the Walkerton, Ont., drinking-water tragedy, this country is still without national standards to ensure safe drinking water for all Canadians, says a new report to be released Monday.

The analysis, *Seeking Water Justice: Strengthening legal protection for Canada's drinking water*, warns there are still significant risks with the water, particularly in rural and First Nation communities.

"Canadians do not have equal access to safe drinking water — a basic source of survival," said an executive summary of the report, obtained by Canwest News Service.

"While high-profile disasters such as Walkerton are rare occurrences in Canada, they are a tragic reminder of the high cost of failing to protect the water we drink."

The report was released to mark the 10th anniversary of the Walkerton tragedy, in which seven people died and thousands became ill because of *E. coli* contamination in the town's drinking water supply, as well as the fifth anniversary of an evacuation of Kashechewan First Nation, Ont., after *E.*

coli was found in the drinking water supplies.

Produced by a coalition of academic, health and environmental groups, the report noted that Canada's system of guidelines falls short of legally binding national standards in other jurisdictions, such as the United States and the European Union.

"Instead, we have voluntary national guidelines and provinces establish their own standards, which may or may not meet those guidelines," said the report. "This leaves significant populations, such as First Nations and rural communities, vulnerable to water-borne diseases, boil water advisories and associated health effects."

As a result, the report said, Canada has a patchwork of standards in various jurisdictions, with only Alberta, Nova Scotia, Quebec, Ontario and Yukon adopting the national guidelines. But nearly half of the jurisdictions in Canada "lack mandatory testing for chemical contamination of drinking water and over half do not require advanced water treatment for surface water, as is required in the European Union and United States," the report said.

Nancy Goucher, a member of the Forum for Leadership on Water, a group of water-policy experts, said the end result is a two-tier system in Canada for rural and First Nation communities versus urban areas of the country.

For example, she said that 116 First Nation communities had boil-water advisories, according to recent statistics from Health Canada, including about 90 per cent that have had the advisories in place for more than a year and 51 per cent that have had advisories for more than three years.

"I don't know if you have lived with a drinking-water advisory," said Goucher. "But the thought of not having that guarantee of safe drinking water, I think, would just reduce your entire quality of life."

Although the regulation and delivery of drinking-water services is a provincial jurisdiction, the report said the federal government should play a leadership role by working with provinces and territories to help them develop better standards. If the governments fail to agree, the report recommends new legislation, a Safe Drinking Water Act, to create a "federal safety net" with minimum national standards and regulations that would be legally binding.

Randy Christensen, a lawyer with Ecojustice — a non-profit organization of lawyers and scientists devoted to protecting the environment — said the legislation could be adopted without requiring any constitutional changes.

"We actually think under existing federal authority, (the federal government) could legislate even taking over the primary delivery of drinking water," said Christensen.

"It would be pursuant to the same powers that allow the federal government to regulate food quality, bottled-water quality and drugs."

It also highlighted another report that recently concluded that the Canadian guidelines were up to 1,000 times weaker than the corresponding standards in the EU and the guidelines in Australia. It said

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Canada had weaker concentration guidelines than the World Health Organization recommends for 53 out of 67 contaminants that were reviewed.

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