

WORLD WATER DAY 2022

THIRSTY FOR CHANGE

NO MORE EXCUSES

Fact Sheet on Sustainable Access to Clean Drinking Water for Indigenous Communities

Who is SAPH?

Student Advocates for Public Health (SAPH) is a group of graduate students formed through the University of Alberta who are dedicated to improving health equity through policy change.

What is the problem?

Indigenous communities across Canada continue to live without access to clean drinking water. The problem continues to persist in the year 2022 because of a number of issues ranging from inadequate funding for critical water infrastructure, including operations and maintenance of water treatment facilities, contaminated cisterns, and outdated government policies and procedures.

Background Facts

The state of water among many Indigenous communities has resulted in severe health outcomes. Canada holds 20% of the world's fresh water supply, yet 36 long-term drinking water advisories are still in effect countrywide.

- The overall number of gastrointestinal infections is approximately **26 times greater** in Indigenous communities in comparison to non-reserve areas.
- Communities relying on cisterns face **twice the risk of COVID-19 transmission** in comparison to those living with piped household water systems.

The focus on lifting BWAs (boil water advisory) alone is not a sustainable solution.

- Often, as one boil water advisory gets lifted, **others take their place**.
- Even without a BWA, fulfilling basic water needs can cost **upwards of \$600 per household**.

Current “solutions” are band-aid fixes that often lack the consideration for long-term impacts.

- Funding to support water infrastructure is **primarily allocated to building or fixing water treatment plants**, rather than providing basic infrastructure.
- Based on a cost analysis, **the cost of maintaining a less safe decentralized system has been shown to be higher** than implementing a safer centralized system.

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What is the context?

The Canadian government has attempted to improve the operation and maintenance (O&M) of water facilities on reserves. On February 29, 2012, *The Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act* (SDWFNA) was originally created to address safe drinking water on reserves. The act was highly opposed by Indigenous Peoples as it was brought into force with a lack of funding and without collaboration.

According to Indigenous Services Canada, between 2015 and 2018, federal contributions to the O&M of on-reserve water and wastewater systems averaged \$146 million per year, but in December 2017, the Parliamentary Budget Officer estimated that annual O&M spending needed to be \$361 million.

- As of March 1, 2022, there were 28 short-term drinking water advisories in place across Canada
- As of March 20, 2022, two communities in Alberta currently have short-term BWA in effect
- A single drinking water advisory can mean as many as 5,000 people lack access to safe, clean drinking water.

Looking forward

As Canadians, we have the moral obligation to ensure that Indigenous communities do not experience another 45 years of failed government attempts to provide clean and sustainable drinking water to Indigenous communities. Therefore, SAPH recommends the following actions:

- Amend *Canada's Water Act* and *The Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act* to ensure that the acts reflect a commitment to *The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*.
- Amend the current legislation so that clean water is recognized as a fundamental human right of all Canadians.
- Establish a National Commitment Statement on Indigenous Water Equity calling upon all levels of government and Indigenous nations to pledge their commitment to working together to deliver sustainable access to clean drinking water in Indigenous communities.

"We still have a long way to go in addressing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, recognizing Indigenous rights and the connection to lands and waters, and the recognition of Indigenous peoples as the rightful stewards of the lands. Addressing the water challenges requires changing the current landscape of decision-making around water and infrastructure.

- Dr. Kerry Black, PhD, University of Calgary (Treaty 7)

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