



David
Suzuki
Foundation

SOLUTIONS ARE IN OUR NATURE



FACT SHEET

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Federal changes needed to meet First Nations drinking water commitment: report

Canada's First Nations drinking water crisis

- A drinking water advisory is a preventative measure implemented to protect public health and communities from contaminated drinking water. As of fall 2016, there were 156 drinking water advisories in 110 First Nations communities across Canada. Many are recurring, and some have been in place for more than 20 years.

Source: <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fniah-spnia/promotion/public-publique/water-dwa-eau-agep-eng.php> and <http://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/environmental-health/drinking-water-safety-program>

- A Human Rights Watch report found that contaminants in drinking water in First Nations communities included coliform, *Escherichia coli* (*E. coli*), cancer-causing trihalomethanes and uranium. Some of these are naturally occurring, some likely result from poor wastewater management and others result from organic material in dirty source water reacting with chemicals meant to disinfect it. Exposure to these types of contaminants can have health impacts that range from serious gastrointestinal disorders to increased cancer risk.

Source: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/06/07/make-it-safe/canadas-obligation-end-first-nations-water-crisis>

- Figures on the financial implications of purchasing and delivering bottled water to impacted communities are not publicly available. However, one Northern Ontario community that was on a drinking water advisory since 2005 reported the federal government has spent at least \$2 million flying in bottled water.

Source: <https://www.thestar.com/news/canada/2015/02/14/ottawa-sends-2m-in-bottled-water-to-first-nation.html>

- Compared to others in Canada, First Nations' homes are 90 times more likely to be without running water.

Source: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. 2009. The State of the World's Indigenous Peoples. New York: United Nations, p. 25

- More than 150,000 people living in First Nations communities use drinking water from treatment plants and pipe networks the government deems to be "high or medium risk".

Source: <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/indigenous-water/article31589755/>

The federal government's campaign promise

- In 2015, the incoming Liberal government committed to ending all First Nations long-term drinking water advisories within five years.

Source: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-election-2015-justin-trudeau-first-nations-boilwater-advisories-1.3258058>

- The 2016 federal budget included \$1.8 billion to help resolve the crisis by 2020, in addition to funding it has already invested in First Nations water infrastructure, operations and management.

Source: <http://www.budget.gc.ca/2016/docs/plan/ch3-en.html>

- In September 2016, the government reaffirmed its commitment “to make this promise a reality”.

Source: <http://news.gc.ca/web/article-en.do?ctr.sj1D=&ctr.mnthndVI=9&mthd=advSrch&ctr.dpt1D=6680&nid=1124109&ctr.lc1D=&ctr.tp1D=&ctr.yrStrtVI=2016&ctr.kw=&ctr.dyStrtVI=25&ctr.aud1D=&ctr.mnthStrtVI=6&ctr.r.page=1&ctr.yrndVI=2016&ctr.dyndVI=23>

The report: Progress to date

- Released by the David Suzuki Foundation and the Council of Canadians, and with advisers Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, the report assesses the federal government's progress in nine First Nations communities across Ontario. With 81 active DWAs — more than any other province — Ontario provides a snapshot of Canada's First Nations water crisis.
- Data for the report were compiled from interviews, meetings, conferences, reports, federal government websites and news releases to assess the progress and challenges First Nations face in attaining clean and safe drinking water. Each organization provided input and expertise based on work it has conducted on this issue.
- Of the nine First Nations profiled in the report, three are on track to or have had drinking water advisories lifted; efforts are underway in three others, but there is uncertainty about whether the advisories will be lifted on time; and for the remaining three, it is unlikely advisories will be lifted by 2020 unless current processes and procedures are reformed.
- Nine First Nations included in report:

(Glass full = DWA has been lifted or is highly likely to be lifted within the five year commitment; glass half empty = efforts underway, but continued uncertainty about whether the DWA will be lifted within the five year commitment; glass empty = unless current processes and procedures are reformed, unlikely that DWA will be lifted within the five year commitment.)

- **Slate Falls Nation** Population: 241 registered — Status: glass full
- **Nibinamik First Nation** Population: 440 registered — Status: glass empty
- **Constance Lake First Nation** Population: 1,508 registered — Status: glass full

- **Northwest Angle No. 33** Population: 466 registered — Status: glass empty
- **Anishinabe of Wauzhushk Onigum** Population: 676 registered — Status: glass half empty
- **North Spirit Lake** Population: 464 registered — Status: glass full
- **Shoal Lake 40** Population: 553 registered — Status: glass half empty
- **Obashkaandagaang First Nation** Population: 296 registered — Status: glass half empty
- **Wawakapewin First Nation** Population: 67 registered — Status: glass empty
- Constance Lake First Nation's boil water advisory was lifted in March 2016, making it the only community surveyed to have access to clean water today. However, since then, sodium levels have become elevated, which has caused the water-treatment plant operator to issue a warning for people on sodium-restricted diets. This is a serious issue for a number of people in the First Nation.

The report: Root causes and recommendations

- Drinking water advisories are often attributed to technical factors like equipment malfunction, lack of disinfection and unacceptable microbiological quality, but past research by our organizations and current conversations with First Nations members and water technicians reveal the root causes behind the lack of progress in resolving advisories. These include:
 1. Highly complex and cumbersome federal process.
 2. Lack of regulatory framework to govern drinking water for First Nations.
 3. Insufficient infrastructure funding and ineffective allocation process.
 4. Lack of adequate resources for operations and management.
 5. Lack of First Nations decision-making power over resolving drinking water issues in their communities.
 6. Lack of transparency in federal monitoring of progress toward ending advisories.
 7. Lack of holistic approach to clean drinking water.
- Overall, the following three changes must be made to the federal government's current process:
 1. *Transparency*: It is extremely difficult to access information on progress toward ending advisories and budget allocations designated for this work.
 2. *Expediency*: Changes need to be made to federal processes if the government is going to fulfil its promise.
 3. *First Nations-led*: First Nations must be recognized and supported as decision-makers in their communities.

- The report outlines a series of 12 recommendations the government can implement to get its work back on track:
 1. Work with First Nations to streamline and simplify the process for capital investments in water infrastructure by identifying roadblocks and reducing bureaucracy.
 2. Work with First Nations to identify an appropriate regulatory framework.
 3. Collaborate with First Nations to co-develop and implement source-water protection and restoration plans.
 4. Work with First Nations to establish federal funding levels and formulas for First Nations drinking water and sewage systems, so that existing systems are not further degraded and water system repair and restoration is not subject to delay.
 5. Work with First Nations to establish federal funding levels and formulas that provide sufficient operations and management capacity to meet their needs.
 6. Eliminate the pay gap between water-systems operators in First Nations and comparable municipalities.
 7. Support First Nations-led approaches to drinking water that recognize the leadership of First Nations governments and organizations.
 8. At the request of First Nations, support collaboration between First Nations and provincial governments.
 9. Take into account context-specific issues for First Nations, such as appropriate construction seasons.
 10. Fulfil government commitments to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, particularly free, prior and informed consent for laws and regulations related to First Nations water, and the UN-recognized human right to safe drinking water and sanitation endorsed by Canada.
 11. Increase federal transparency and reporting of budget spending and progress toward ending long-term drinking water advisories in First Nations.
 12. Ensure that water issues are not addressed in isolation but are linked to wider issues such as housing, infrastructure, training and impacts to watersheds from industrial activities.

The complete *Glass half empty? Year 1 progress toward resolving drinking water advisories in nine First Nations in Ontario* report is available at davidsuzuki.org/water.