

Dozens of Canadian Indigenous communities under boil-water advisories one year into pandemic

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1 April 2021

As of March 2021, Canada's Liberal government officially failed to meet its five-year, self-imposed deadline to lift all long-term drinking water advisories in First Nations reserves across the country.

More than one year after the outbreak of the deadly coronavirus pandemic, dozens of Indigenous communities across the country continue to lack drinking water, making it impossible for residents to follow basic hygiene measures to reduce the spread of COVID-19 and combat other infectious diseases.

In late February, the Auditor General of Canada, Karen Hogan, presented a report documenting the total failure of successive Canadian governments, including Justin Trudeau's Liberals, to provide for Indigenous communities' most basic needs. "Access to safe drinking water is a basic human necessity," Hogan said at a news conference in Ottawa. "I don't believe anyone would say that this is in any way an acceptable situation in Canada in 2021."

In the 2015 election campaign that propelled them back to power after a decade in opposition, Justin Trudeau's Liberals solemnly pledged to address the substandard water conditions faced by First Nations communities across the country. Trudeau specifically committed to having all advisories lifted within five years of entering office. This was accompanied by propaganda, parroted by media outlets, about Trudeau's desire to affect a "reconciliation" with the Native population, which was focused above all at cultivating ties with a privileged indigenous elite with whom Canadian capitalism could do business. The Liberals' miserable failure to meet their own targets on drinking water only goes to show that the fraudulent "reconciliation" campaign never had anything to offer the vast majority of the Native population, which continues to live in abject poverty.

In the years following the Liberal Party's election victory, over \$2 billion was allocated to improving water conditions for the affected First Nations reserves. An estimated \$1.79 billion of this had been spent as of November 2020, and at present 101 long-term boil-water advisories have been lifted.

However, 58 long-term advisories remain in effect across Canada—some of which have been in force for over two decades. The Zhiibaahaasing First Nation of Silver Water, Ontario was placed under a boil-water advisory in 1991, and Shoal Lake 40, a First Nation situated on the Ontario-Manitoba border, has been burdened with a long-term advisory for 23 years.

Neskantaga First Nation in northern Ontario has been without access to clean water for more than 25 years. On the home page of the nation's website, a tracker is displayed that counts how many days it

has been under the boil-water advisory. As of yesterday, April 1, it read 9,555 days.

Neskantaga Nation members have twice been evacuated due to the dangers posed by the lack of access to clean water, most recently in October 2020. That month over 250 residents of the remote community were evacuated after an oily sheen was discovered in their water reservoir. Subsequent testing showed high levels of hydrocarbons in the water. The residents were moved from their homes to a hotel in Thunder Bay, more than 400 kilometres away.

While staying in Thunder Bay, some of the Neskantaga youths held a rally to call for action to be taken and the water crisis to be addressed. Two months passed before residents were able to return to their homes, though their two-and-a-half-decade-long boil-water advisory remains very much in place.

Serious health consequences

Peer-reviewed research published between 2000 and 2015 on water and health in Indigenous communities in Canada suggests that issues commonly reported in relation to contaminated water include cancers, skin problems, gastrointestinal system issues, birth defects, obesity, mental health problems, heart diseases, liver diseases, kidney problems, neurological problems, immunopathology and a high rate of infant mortality.

Infant mortality rates are twice as high among Canada's Indigenous population as they are in the general Canadian population. A crisis often occurs when multiple women in a birth centre are in labour simultaneously, only for the centre to suddenly run out of water.

Midwives from the Six Nations of the Grand River Reserve in Ontario estimate that half of all mothers returning home with new babies to their community do not have access to clean water.

Prime Minister Trudeau has cited the COVID-19 pandemic as being a major contributing factor to the federal government's failure to fulfill its pledge to provide First Nations with clean water. However, Auditor General Hogan's report makes clear that many of the government's own goals had not been met before the pandemic's erupted 13 months ago.

Hogan also pointed out that the government has not updated its funding formula for First Nations' water systems for thirty years.

The federal government's priorities are evident when one considers

the hundreds of billions of dollars in bailouts made available virtually overnight to big business during the pandemic. While First Nations communities are told that the funding or resources just aren't available to end the water crisis any time soon, many of the corporations shown much loyalty by the Canadian ruling elite actively contribute to the degradation and destruction of Indigenous land. The Canadian petroleum company Imperial Oil, for example, received \$120 million in government aid.

In stark contrast, the Neskantaga First Nation has received just \$16 million, which was used to upgrade its water facility into "a chemically-assisted conventional treatment system." The upgrade was initially scheduled for completion in the spring of 2018, but the project was delayed for almost three years.

Another factor in the First Nations' water crisis is inefficient decentralized water systems.

In the case of the Tsuut'ina First Nation in Alberta, a water treatment facility built in 2019 principally serves the area surrounding the local schools. However, this has left many homes without a connection to the treatment centre, forcing their residents to continue to rely on wells and cisterns for their water supply.

Tsuut'ina resident Kylie Meguinis recently told Global News that for those using a cistern to access water, a water truck arrives roughly every four days to fill the cistern. For large families or houses home to multiple families, it is not uncommon to run out of water long before the next delivery is scheduled. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, with children homeschooling and people being forced to stay inside more than they previously did.

She explained that she keeps a lock on her laundry room door, members of her household are limited to taking a five-minute shower once every other day, and receptacles like her kettle are never filled higher than a carefully marked line. She spends hundreds of dollars every week on bottled water because she doesn't want her children to consume the water that is available.

In the last six years, Tsuut'ina First Nation has had over eleven "do not consume" water advisories (DWA) issued. Studies have shown that cistern systems are prone to contamination. The transportation and storage process allows for E-coli and other dangerous bacteria to thrive and spread.

Concordia University's Institute for Investigative Journalism recently uncovered information indicating that the risk of an outbreak of COVID-19 is twice as likely in communities where cisterns are used. Cistern water has also been shown to have long-term detrimental effects on people's immune systems.

Cistern systems are being used on reserves, rather than providing fresh water through pipes, because they cost Ottawa less money.

Governments refuse to collect data on health crisis

For years, Indigenous people dealing firsthand with water crises have speculated about the ways in which the impure water they are able to access might be affecting their health. First Nations have voiced concerns that contaminated water may be the cause of various illnesses, birth defects and deaths.

However, there is a severe lack of data, making it difficult to impossible to mount a serious epidemiological study.

The Canadian government has not tracked or studied water-related

illnesses. Even the First Nations Health Authority in British Columbia, the first province-wide health authority established to serve First Nations in Canada, does not track water-related illnesses or deaths on BC reserves.

A year-long investigation into water issues in First Nations communities entitled "Clean Water, Broken Promises" was published in January. It was the result of a collaborative effort by various universities and media outlets across the country.

The investigation noted that in 2017, researchers from the School of Public Health and Health Systems at the University of Waterloo conducted a study reviewing research done on waterborne and foodborne illnesses in Indigenous communities. They found only two studies from the past fifty years which focused exclusively on waterborne illness in Indigenous communities. Three others looked at food and waterborne illnesses, but overall there remains a shocking lack of data and studies on the matter.

Some critics have accused the Canadian government of deliberately failing to collect information and data so as to avoid being held accountable for illnesses and deaths.

Further complicating the issue and hampering potential future investigations or inquiries is the fact that, in Canada, deaths are classified following the World Health Organization system that requires a single immediate cause of death be selected when an individual has died. Unlike in other countries, health professionals are not required to list an underlying cause of death.

This policy no doubt contributes to major data gaps and an underestimation of the impact of water-related diseases, including on mortality rates. In Alberta, Quebec and Yukon there have been no recorded deaths related to drinking water recorded by their respective coroners' offices since the year 2000. Nor have any been recorded by the Saskatchewan Coroners Service since electronic records were implemented.

When the "Clean Water, Broken Promises" investigation reached out to Indigenous Services Canada for comment, spokesperson Leslie Michelson said, "There is no national surveillance system specifically for waterborne disease outbreaks. When epidemiological evidence indicates that drinking water is, or may be, responsible for a disease outbreak, a DWA is issued."

Michelson acknowledged that tracking waterborne illnesses "can be under-reported as they are difficult to identify, and the collection of information can be incomplete or not widely published/distributed."

Michelson also stated that, since the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch was created in 2003, there has not been a confirmed waterborne disease outbreak identified in a First Nation.

When Indigenous Services Minister Marc Miller had to publicly admit last December that the Liberals' commitment to lift all boil-water advisories by March 2021 would not be met, he committed the government to spending an additional \$1.5 billion on addressing the water crisis on First Nations reserves. But the expenditure is spread out over the next decade-and-a-half, with the bulk of the money to be spent only after the 2026-27 fiscal year.



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