



Backgrounder

First Nations Water Quality



October 28, 2005

Results from the First Nations Regional Longitudinal Health Survey (RHS) confirm serious concerns about community water quality and has identified 21 communities to be at high risk. Water quality has recently been brought to the forefront by the crisis at Kashechewan First Nation.

Kashechewan is located on the northern shore of the Albany River, ten kilometers upstream from James Bay. It is an isolated community and the nearest urban center, Timmins, is located approximately 300 miles south. Elijah Wesley, a life long resident, indicates the creek is "probably full" of E. coli. A nearby sewage lagoon is located less than 140 metres upstream from the reserve's now infamous water treatment plant. And the creek's shifting tides, he said, roll that bacteria up river and back. "Probably the majority of the people here have E. coli in their system from the drinking water," says Wesley, vice-principal of the local elementary school until it closed two weeks ago because its water was deemed unsafe. Trying to combat the E. coli by over-chlorinating the water only made matters worse as it resulted in people contracting burns and other skin lesions.

Traditional Indigenous teachings across the globe equate water with life. At an *Indigenous Water Rights* Forum in Pinewa, Manitoba last year, Cree Doctoral student Darlene Sanderson presented perspectives from her research with Elders indicating that "From the teachings of the Elders we learn that: Water is life; and Water is sacred; Water is the life breath of the Creator." Water is no ordinary element—water is power. Water is important to us emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally. Water connects all living things. Understanding the meaning of water helps us to understand our interconnectedness."

(<http://www.kairoscanada.org/e/ecology/water/ourWaterOurResponsibility.asp>).

Since, "water is life" and there is clear demonstration that water quality in many First Nations communities is very poor, clean water and proper sewage facilities in First Nations communities in Canada should be of the highest priority. In a National Aboriginal Health Organization paper entitled *Drinking Water Safety in Aboriginal Communities in Canada* (2002) it is noted that unclean drinking water for First Nations, while not a primary concern over the past hundred years for mainstream Canada, is an issue "repeatedly identified as a major source of concern and a perennial cause of illness".

This statement is one strongly echoed and supported by RHS 2002/03 results regarding water in First Nations communities. According to the study, accessing quality water resources is a concern for many First Nations communities:

- About one-third (32.2%) of First Nations adults consider their household water unsafe to drink.
- Seven in ten adults (70.8%) resorted to alternative sources for drinking water.
- While most (63.2%) get water by pipe from a local source, about one in six get it from a well (16.5%) or delivered by truck (15.9%).
- Despite being their main supply, about one in thirty (3.4%) collect it themselves from rivers, lakes or ponds (0.9%), from the water plant (1.8%) or from a neighbour's house (0.7%).
- Among those who indicated their water was unsafe (32.2%), more than nine in ten (92.9%) resorted to alternative sources for drinking water.
- The most common alternate source of drinking water was bottled water, mentioned by 61.7% of all respondents. This compares with 35% of Canadians who report drinking bottled water at least once a week.

Along with the high number of people that considered their water unsafe to drink (onethird), the above results also imply sub-standard water/sewage systems and a low level of trust with respect to general water safety.

The RHS is an initiative that is mandated by the First Nations Information Governance Committee (FNIGC) and housed by the First Nations Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization. The three national survey instruments developed take into consideration a comprehensive range of health status, wellness and health determinants measures within a cultural and holistic framework. The questionnaires have been described as “the best ever and most extensive First Nations questionnaires on record.” The questions were refined over two years and validated scientifically and by First Nations.

Full official results from the RHS will be released at the upcoming conference November 13–15, 2005. For more information, please visit the following links:

National Aboriginal Health Organization

http://www.naho.ca/firstnations/english/regional_health.php

Assembly of First Nations

<http://www.afn.ca/>

Health Canada: First Nations and Inuit Health

http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/fnih-spni/promotion/water-eau/index_e.html

Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/nr/prs/m-a2003/02304bka_e.html