

Our drinking water: more protection is needed

How safe is your drinking water? Let's hold a public meeting and just bet that no one shows up unless there's a bingo taking place at the same time . . . or a casino night.

This is not to imply that it is a gamble every time you take a drink of water from the tap.

But as we mark the 10th anniversary of the Walkerton tragedy, when seven people died and thousands became ill because of E. coli contamination in a municipal water supply, it might be time to reflect on how far we have come and how far we have to go.

While most municipalities are painfully aware of new drinking water standards and more rigorous testing systems introduced since the tragedy, there is still work to do.

A new report, titled "Seeking Water Justice," says there are still significant risks with drinking water, particularly in rural and First Nations communities.

Most of us have noted that in rural areas, drinking water from wells is no longer deemed safe for use at isolated community centres, churches and halls that are not on regularly-tested municipal systems.

In Canada, the regulation of drinking water and the delivery of services are governed by provincial rules, but in many cases are also managed by municipalities who hire experts to oversee their systems, if they do not have their own staff trained to do so.

Some argue that Canada should have federal regulations to replace the current varied patchwork of existing standards. Ecojustice, a non-profit organization of lawyers and scientists devoted to environmental issues, highlighted a report concluding that Canadian guidelines for drinking water were up to 1,000 times weaker than those of Australia and the European Union.

According to recent statistics from Health Canada, 116 First Nations communities had boil-water advisories in place, including about 90 per cent which have had the advisories in place for more than a year and just over 50 per

cent which have had advisories for more than three years.

According to the Eastern Ontario Health Unit website, current drinking water advisories that are in effect include: Paul Rozon Park in Williamstown (since November 7, 2008); Green Valley Community Centre (since May 22, 2009); Two Doorz Down in Maxville (since August 21, 2009); Cornwall Motor Speedway (since August 31, 2009); Fauteux Mobile Trailer Park, Hawkesbury (since October 15, 2009); Prescott-Russell Station No. 2 Emergency Services Department, Rockland (since February 10, 2010); St-Bernardin Community Centre (since April 16, 2010) and Dalkeith Community Centre (since April 29, 2010).

Ten years after Walkerton, it is often too easy to "forget" the tragedy in which seven people died and another 2,500 became ill. In light of it, however, we – as a uniform, concerned public – should advocate for stricter national guidelines at the federal level.

Here in Champlain, the drinking water intake is located in Hawkesbury, about 40 metres offshore and 4.5 metres deep in the Ottawa River. At a recent public consultation hosted by the local water source protection committee, it highlighted the fact the intake is located behind the CIP lagoon site.

The committee is currently developing a protection plan for the region, under the provincial Clean Water Act (established following Walkerton), to be completed by 2012. Its purpose is to identify vulnerable areas around the region's water source intakes, as well as potential risks from land-use activities such as sewage, oil, and pesticides.

The public's input, and its consultation, are essential to such a process because it may have area-specific details relative the committee's needs; vice versa, the committee would have information relative to the public's safety.

In that respect, as one hydrogeologist stressed late last year, education and prevention are the two most important points. Together, we can increase our awareness and demand greater protection.

- L.S. & J.B.