

## **The Water Crisis in Canada's First Nations communities**

Canada is one of the wealthiest and most water rich countries in the world. Yet many of its First Nations communities continue to lack safe drinking water — a basic human right. As of February [2020], 61 Indigenous reserves were under long-term drinking water advisories, half of which remain unresolved after more than a decade. These water advisories warn people to either boil water before use, not to consume it, or avoid it altogether because of toxicity levels.

Curve Lake First Nation, a forested community in southern Canada is surrounded on three sides by fresh water. But for decades, residents have been unable to safely make use of it. Wary of crumbling infrastructure and waterborne illness, the community instead relies on shipments of bottled water. The community's newly elected chief, aged 34, has lived her whole life without the guarantee of clean water flowing from the tap. "The emotional and spiritual damage of not having clean water, having to look at all of the water surrounding us on a daily basis and unable to use it, is almost unquantifiable," said Chief Emily Whetung.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has vowed to end these advisories by March 2021. But while the government presented action plans on many topics during the speech from the throne on Sept. 23 [2020], it failed to mention its promise to bring safe drinking water to all Indigenous reserves by next spring. The pandemic has made it more difficult for construction workers to enter communities, potentially resulting in a delay in resolving these critical water supply issues. "It should not take that long to ... improve people's lives on reserves and in communities when [the government] can do much, much more for regular Canadians at the drop of a hat when something like COVID-19 hits," said Rob Houle, an Indigenous advocate from Swan River First Nation.

The oldest advisory that's still in effect today was put in place back in 1995 on the Neskantaga First Nation. This means that the Neskantaga reserve has now been deprived of safe drinking water for a quarter of a century. In September 2019, the remote community declared a state of emergency when a water pump failed, leaving some homes completely without running water and others with water that was not safe to use except to flush toilets. One year later, its people still have to boil water for safety.

Some communities have struggled for years with contaminated water tainted by chemicals and wastes such as mercury as in the case of the Grassy Narrows First Nation where soil and river sediments remain polluted at or near the site of an old paper mill.

According to Water First, a non-Indigenous charity based in Creemore, Ont., 13.5 per cent of First Nations communities in Canada are under a boil water advisory and the rate goes up to 40 per cent in Ontario. Under the boil water advisory, which makes up the majority of all long-term advisories, communities need to boil all water for at least one minute before drinking, brushing their teeth, or cooking, and should not use tap water to bathe infants,

toddlers, or the elderly. The other two types of advisories — do not consume, and do not use — have even stricter guidelines.

Jamie Lee Parenteau, who is from the Wabigoon Lake Ojibway Nation explains the crisis for her community. “In our culture, water is so much more. It’s sacred. Our people could just go to the lake for everything. That was before all these things like the (pulp) mills and mercury poisoning. Our people drink that water and got poisoned by it. Clean running water isn’t a luxury. Everyone deserves it. Everyone needs it,”

Extracted from:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/30/canada-first-nations-justin-trudeau-drinking-water>

- <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/canada-indigenous-drinking-water-dangers/>

- <https://www.stcatharinesstandard.ca/ts/news/canada/2021/10/24/in-our-culture-water-is-so-much-more-its-sacred-new-wave-of-indigenous-operators-look-to-tackle-drinking-water-woes.html>

### **Questions**

- 1) What are some root causes of the water crisis in the First Nation communities?
- 2) How would the crisis affect the mental and emotional health of the communities?
- 3) What should be our response to this crisis?