



Action Plan for Safe Drinking Water in British Columbia



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Ministry of Health Planning
Ministry of Health Services

National Library of Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data
British Columbia. Ministry of Health Services.
Action plan for safe drinking water in British Columbia

ISBN 0-7726-4809-3

1. Water quality management - British Columbia.
 2. Water-supply - Government policy - British Columbia.
 3. Drinking water - Contamination - British Columbia.
- I. Title.

TD227.B74B74 2002

363.6'1'09711

C2002-960157-6

OUR GOAL :

Safe Drinking Water For All British Columbians

Our Commitment

The provincial government is committed to ensuring safe, reliable and accessible drinking water for all British Columbians. To that end, the government has developed a new action plan to safeguard the quality of drinking water throughout the province.

New Protection - from Source to Tap

The action plan includes comprehensive legislation and measures to protect drinking water from source to tap by improving standards for monitoring, treatment, reporting and accountability to the public.

New Infrastructure Already Underway

In the past year alone, the provincial government has approved 92 water-related improvement projects worth \$239 million to be funded through the Canada-British Columbia Infrastructure Program. The government is also increasing funding for water quality monitoring by \$1.5 million a year for the next three years.

But there is still much more to be done to ensure safe drinking water for all British Columbians.

THE CHALLENGE :

Stronger Protection is Needed

Health Concerns Must be Addressed

For most British Columbians, accessing safe drinking water is as simple as turning on the tap. But many have health concerns about the quality of their water. In August 2001, for example, there were 304 communities under boil water advisories in B.C.

Infrastructure is Aging

A 1996 report on the state of Canada's municipal infrastructure found that British Columbia's water distribution and supply systems were, on average, the second oldest in the country and had an average age beyond the expected life span for such systems.

British Columbia's Water Systems

There are more than 3,300 water systems in B.C. The 96 systems operating in large municipalities serve close to 90 per cent of the population. The remaining 10 per cent of the population is served by a variety of public and private systems:

- Small municipalities (57 systems);
- Regional district service areas (97 systems);
- Improvement districts (211 systems);
- Private water utilities (185 systems);
- Water users communities (118 systems);
- First Nation reserves (468 systems);
- Individual private wells and domestic licensees (est. 63,000);
- Others including Crown Corporations, industrial operations, BC Parks and private campgrounds, mobile home parks, restaurants and service stations (estimated 2100 systems).

Approximately 2,000 systems have fewer than 15 connections.

THE SOLUTION :

Principles for Protection

A Platform for Action

Based on these needs, and on inquiries conducted in other provinces, the government's Action Plan for Safe Drinking Water sets out specific principles and actions that the government will undertake to make sure British Columbians enjoy safe, clean, healthy drinking water as effectively, efficiently and reliably as possible.

The plan is based on the recommendations in recent reviews and reports, including those conducted by the Auditor General, the Provincial Health Officer, and the Drinking Water Review Panel.

Principles for Drinking Water Protection

It proposes a number of improvements to strengthen the protection of drinking water based on the following eight principles for drinking water systems in British Columbia:

1. The safety of drinking water is a public health issue.
2. Source protection is a critical part of drinking water protection.
3. Providing safe drinking water requires an integrated approach.
4. All water systems need to be thoroughly assessed to determine risks.
5. Proper treatment and water distribution system integrity are important to protect human health.
6. Tap water must meet acceptable safety standards and be monitored.
7. Small systems require a flexible system with safeguards.
8. Safe drinking water should be affordable, with users paying appropriate costs.

THE SOLUTION :

Strong, Effective Legislation

An Improved Drinking Water Protection Act

In September 2001, the government established the independent Drinking Water Review Panel to review the Drinking Water Protection Act passed by the previous government in April 2001. After considering the panel's recommendations, the government is now ready to introduce legislative changes to the Drinking Water Protection Act in the fall 2002 legislative session.

New Groundwater Protection Legislation

In keeping with the government's New Era commitment, the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection is also developing comprehensive new groundwater protection legislation.

This legislation will focus on drinking water protection through mechanisms like higher standards for groundwater sources, such as well construction and mandatory reporting of drilling activities.

Regulations to Protect Public Health and Safety

Building on the new legislation, new regulations will also be put in place to:

- Enhance groundwater protection.
- Improve water treatment and distribution standards, based on advice from the drinking water advisory committee.
- Outline new training and certification requirements for water system operators.
- Establish basic monitoring requirements, which can be supplemented by orders from drinking water officers.

THE SOLUTION :

Clear Responsibility Within Government

Proper Coordination of Resources

Many ministries and government agencies are involved in different aspects of drinking water protection. But until now, there has been no proper coordination and integration of these functions.

One of the first objectives of the new legislation will be to ensure clear lines of responsibility within government for the various aspects of drinking water protection.

Ministry of Health Services Responsible For Delivery

In keeping with the principle that the safety of drinking water is a public health issue, the Ministry of Health Services will now be the lead ministry responsible for implementing the action plan.

The ministry will provide the leadership needed to co-ordinate their activities and will assume ultimate responsibility for providing safe drinking water for British Columbians.

The Provincial Health Officer has the mandate to ensure the accountability of government and those delivering drinking water to British Columbians.

Coordination of Source Protection, Land Use Planning, and Infrastructure

The Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection will be responsible for source water quality standards, monitoring, compliance and enforcement, and resource ministries will continue to be responsible for protecting drinking water sources under their legislated mandates.

The Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management will work with communities to help make appropriate land use decisions that carefully consider drinking water protection.

The Ministry of Community, Aboriginal and Women's Services will work in partnership with federal and local governments to help ensure required infrastructure is in place.

Inter-Ministry Drinking Water Committee

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Health Services, an inter-ministry committee will be established to coordinate these drinking water protection measures, identify emerging issues and to ensure proper integration - from source to tap.

New Advisory Panels to Provide Expert Advice

A new drinking water advisory committee and a groundwater advisory board are being established. Comprised of public health, private sector and academic experts in water quality, these two bodies will provide technical advice to government on regulations and standards to ensure safe drinking water.

They will also assist the Minister of Health Services and the Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection by providing input and advice on specific issues and water quality problems as they arise.

IMPLEMENTATION :

New Resources to Improve Protection

New Drinking Water Officers

The new Drinking Water Protection Act will define the authority of an important new group of drinking water protection officers. The people working for health authorities in these newly created front-line positions will provide a unique focus on protecting drinking water in every region of the province.

They will have the authority to investigate complaints, require testing and assessment, perform inspections, coordinate source protection, issue orders and take many other steps to ensure water safety.

A Provincewide Source-To-Tap Assessment

All drinking water systems in British Columbia will undergo a source-to-tap assessment starting with those that may pose the highest risk to users. These assessments will be undertaken by water system providers with assistance from drinking water officers and any other required government agencies.

While local health authorities and water providers already conduct some system surveys, this new series of assessments will provide the more comprehensive information needed to plan system improvements and identify any source contaminations that need to be fixed.

Increased Inspection and Testing

Inspection and laboratory testing will be increased to ensure compliance with province-wide tap water standards for contaminants that present a health risk. Laboratories will have to meet specific standards and will be required to report health threats to a drinking water officer, the water supplier and a medical health officer.

Basic monitoring requirements will be established that can be supplemented by orders from drinking water officers. Water suppliers will also be required to report imminent threats and, where monitoring indicates potential concerns, further action may be ordered.

When other measures fail to resolve a health concern, the Provincial Health Officer can ask the Minister of Health Services to recommend Cabinet approval to develop a site-specific drinking water plan, giving human health protection top priority.

New Reporting to Ensure Accountability

To ensure accountability for increased testing, assessments and monitoring, the following reporting measures will also be implemented:

- Water quality information will be regularly reported to the public.
- The Provincial Health Officer will have a statutory obligation to advise government if additional source protection is necessary to protect public health.
- Water suppliers will be held accountable for meeting the terms and conditions of their operation permits. They will also be required to report imminent threats, such as treatment equipment failure, to drinking water officers and must ensure immediate public notification.

- Testing laboratories will be required to report health threats when identified.
- Anyone operating, maintaining or repairing a water system will be required to undergo training, meet qualifications set out in new regulations, or be supervised by someone who does.

Local Co-ordination and Co-operation

The provincial government will work closely with local communities, First Nations and the federal government to enhance co-operation and co-ordination at all levels.

Locally-developed solutions will be encouraged – particularly where infrastructure improvements are needed – in order to meet provincial health standards while also considering the economic impact on the affected communities.



Ensuring Resources to Finance New Improvements

Better Treatment Through Improved Infrastructure

As noted, one important purpose of increased assessment and testing is to clearly identify all infrastructure improvements that are needed.

In addition to the infrastructure improvements already underway through the Canada-B.C. Infrastructure Program, further needs will be identified as testing occurs, in order to ensure better treatment.

Financing New Infrastructure

The new action plan for safe drinking water is projected to cost \$16 million a year.

To provide new treatment and infrastructure, new financial resources will be required. The government is improving drinking water services – and improved services come with a financial cost. Safe, clean drinking water is not free.

As a result, those who will receive the benefit of improved water services may need to share in the associated costs. At the same time, the government is committed to ensure that the resources needed to pay for these improved services are generated in a way that is fair, workable and affordable.

Local Consultation To Develop Funding Solutions

The government will immediately begin consultations with key stakeholders on developing cost-recovery options to finance the \$16-million annual cost of implementing the new drinking water action plan.

Wherever possible and practical, the government will continue to fund needed improvements through opportunities like the Canada-B.C. Infrastructure Program. In other cases, the government will work with communities and the public to develop new funding options that are fair, workable and affordable.

Flexibility For Small Systems

Small water systems often lack the financial resources and technical expertise available to maintain and monitor larger systems like those in major urban centres. While standards for public safety must apply province-wide, the government is also committed to ensure flexibility to reflect and accommodate different sizes of water systems and different water sources.

Specifically, the government will create a management plan that allows for the potential to affiliate small systems with local or regional governments, thus making the systems eligible for federal-provincial infrastructure grants.

On a case-by-case basis, drinking water officers may also permit different monitoring and assessment requirements for small water systems than would be required for large systems. For example, there could be more flexibility in the time allowed for small water systems to comply to standards, as long as interim measures are adequate to protect against immediate health risks. But, in the end, standards will ensure all systems of any size effectively address human health concerns.

CONCLUSION :

Better Health for All British Columbians

Improved Protection

With the implementation of the Action Plan for Safe Drinking Water, British Columbians and their communities will benefit from an improved drinking water system, based on:

- Stronger and more effective legislation and regulation that places public health as the first priority.
- Improved leadership and accountability.
- Better co-ordination and co-operation between agencies involved in providing drinking water.
- Increased and more effective monitoring and assessment of local drinking water systems.
- Flexibility that recognizes the unique challenges involved in operating and maintaining small water systems.
- A commitment to funding improved and expanded services in a way that is fair, workable and affordable.

A Better Quality of Life for Everyone

Ultimately, the single most important benefit of safe, reliable and accessible drinking water will be improved health and a better quality of life for all British Columbians.



BRITISH
COLUMBIA

Ministry of Health Planning
Ministry of Health Services