



Water

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated many structural inequalities in Canada, including the lack of universal access to water and sanitation. Regular hand washing is critical to stopping the spread of the virus. Yet in many communities this basic need and fundamental human right is lacking, putting residents at a higher risk of infection.

Across Canada there are over 100 First Nation communities without access to safe, clean water. Currently, Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) reports 74 communities are under long-term (over a year) drinking water advisories and 32 are under short-term drinking water advisories.¹ Not all of these communities receive federal support; many live without access to running water and must rely on cisterns or pails instead.² The federal government has made concrete, though slow, progress with its commitment to end all long-term drinking water advisories by 2021, but the delays due to COVID-19 make meeting that deadline unlikely.

Inadequate access to water and sanitation, as well as overcrowded housing and limited access to health care facilities, put Indigenous communities at higher risk from COVID-19. The CCPA-Manitoba recently spotlighted two northern Manitoba First Nations where residents have to ration the limited water supply and cram into crowded homes, making hand-washing and self-isolation guidelines out-of-touch advice akin to “let them eat cake.”³ To combat COVID-19, the federal government has allocated over \$1 billion for health, economic, and social support for Indigenous communities on and off reserve, which is urgently needed.

Municipalities across the country are straining under the pressure of the pandemic. Cities and towns are losing at least \$10–15 billion in revenue from property taxes and user fees while stretching themselves thin to support residents, according to the Federation of Canadian

Municipalities (FCM).⁴ This financial shortfall could result in the loss of essential local services and worsen the public health crisis.

In the medium to long term, the current shortfall further compounds decades of cost downloading and prevents municipalities from making necessary investments in critical infrastructure and services. The federal government has announced an accelerated delivery of \$2.2 billion for municipalities from the Gas Tax Fund, but this is simply already promised support on a modified schedule.

Meanwhile, the Canada Infrastructure Bank (CIB) continues with its mandate to invite private investors to finance major infrastructure projects. In 2019, the CIB announced a \$20 million investment in a public-private partnership for water and wastewater infrastructure in Mapleton, Ontario, with a plan to replicate this model across Canada.

Cash-strapped municipalities are more likely to fall prey to this inefficient, costly, and faulty private funding model. In the process, they risk losing control of critical infrastructure and services like water when they are faced with substantial budget shortfalls caused by COVID-19 shutdowns.

Toward a just recovery

COVID-19 has revealed an unfortunate reality: water and sanitation are not universally accessible in Canada. Under the AFB Recovery Plan, the federal government plays a critical role in implementing the human right to water in Canada through a strong policy framework, adequate public funding that centres communities (not private interests), and better water protection legislation.

In addition to providing support for the most vulnerable communities, the government has an opportunity to approach water governance with a commitment to respecting Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination over their lands and waters. Communities must be at the heart of any recovery and rebuilding efforts through direct support for, and investments in, essential infrastructure and services at the municipal level.

COVID-19 short-term response phase

- The AFB Recovery Plan strengthens support for Indigenous communities fighting COVID-19 by providing financial support to on- and off-reserve First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities on a needs and equity basis. Part of that support includes temporary solutions to ensure immediate access to safe, clean water and adequate sanitation for communities with drinking water advisories or without a water system. The federal government will also engage with communities in making decisions about how to respond to the pandemic while respecting their sovereignty and self-determination.
- To ensure no loss in essential services such as water, sewage treatment, public health, or emergency response, the AFB Recovery Plan invests \$12 billion to help municipalities maintain their short-term operations (see the Cities and infrastructure chapter). It also allows local governments to qualify for the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy so they can minimize layoffs of municipal employees and reductions in services. Beyond immediate operations, support should continue into the medium term, to build resilience and prepare for additional outbreaks.

COVID-19 medium-term recovery phase

- The federal government must learn from the COVID-19 pandemic and prioritize policies that deliver universal access to water and sanitation. Through the newly formed Canada Water Agency, the AFB Recovery Plan will enshrine the human right to water and sanitation into federal legislation, establish an implementation framework to clarify the government's obligations, and co-ordinate work across federal departments and jurisdictions.
- One of the most urgent priorities is to end drinking water advisories, especially in First Nations communities. The AFB Recovery Plan will allocate adequate funding to fulfil the current commitment to end drinking water advisories, including support and resources for training, operations, and maintenance. Beyond that, the AFB Recovery Plan commits to supporting and investing in Indigenous-led legislation and solutions, such as the First

Nations–led Safe Drinking Water Legislation or the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority.

- The AFB Recovery Plan tasks the Canada Water Agency with establishing a national drinking water standard, harmonizing the patchwork of policies across provinces, and continuing to implement the Wastewater Systems Effluent Regulations passed in 2012. The AFB Recovery Plan will help communities implement these policies with public infrastructure funding to replace lead lines, upgrade sewage treatment plants, and improve the resilience of water and wastewater infrastructure in a changing climate.
- The creation of the Canada Water Agency is also an opportunity to strengthen our policies to protect freshwater, oceans, and drinking water sources, and respect Indigenous rights. In addition to working with Indigenous nations and across jurisdictions to co-develop water policies, the Canada Water Agency is tasked with implementing a plan to protect the Great Lakes Basin, mapping all of Canada’s watersheds, establishing freshwater quality and quantity monitoring frameworks, investing in and co-ordinating scientific research, developing a groundwater protection plan, and reviewing virtual water exports.

COVID-19 long-term rebuilding phase

- After the COVID-19 crisis passes, significant investments in infrastructure could quickly put Canadians back to work and help close the infrastructure gap. Investments in water and wastewater infrastructure must benefit communities, not private interests. The AFB Recovery Plan will shift the mandate of the Canada Infrastructure Bank away from promoting private investments through public-private partnerships to funding community infrastructure projects directly.
- The AFB also brings back and strengthens the Clean Water and Wastewater Fund to support municipalities in repairing and replacing critical infrastructure, speeds up infrastructure funding through the Invest in Canada Plan, and sets aside a separate fund

for small municipalities that often have a hard time accessing funds due to high per capita costs.

Notes

- 1** See Indigenous Services Canada, “Ending long-term drinking water advisories” (<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660>) and “Short-term drinking water advisories” (<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1562856509704/1562856530304>).
- 2** Indigenous Services Canada, “Long-term advisories affecting water systems not financially supported by the Government of Canada South of 60”: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1516134315897/1533663683531>.
- 3** Shirley Thompson, Marleny Bonnycastle and Stewart Hill, “COVID-19, First Nations and Poor Housing,” CCPA-Manitoba, May 2020: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba%20Office/2020/05/COVID%20FN%20Poor%20Housing.pdf>.
- 4** Federation of Canadian Municipalities, “Protecting vital municipal services,” April 23, 2020: <https://www.policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/Manitoba%20Office/2020/05/COVID%20FN%20Poor%20Housing.pdf>.