



## Canada-wide investigation reveals dangerously high levels of lead in tap water

By Vi Bui

**A Canada-wide investigation has revealed dangerously high levels of lead in tap water across the country. This investigation took a combined effort from 120 journalists, working at nine universities and 10 media organizations across the country. They reported that millions of Canadians are exposed to this neurotoxin through the aging lead pipes that distribute water from municipal water treatment plant to households across 11 cities.**

This is a public health crisis. The World Health Organization states there is no safe level of lead. This toxic metal is damaging to human health, causing long-term and irreversible effects to the brain and nervous systems. It causes developmental and behavioural changes in children and increased risk of high blood pressure and kidney disease in adults.

While this latest discovery got a lot of media attention, it's just a piece in a larger issue with Canada's drinking water.

The United Nations recognized the human right to water and sanitation in 2010. Although Canada joined the international consensus in 2012, the fundamental right to clean, safe drinking water is not being consistently and effectively delivered. There are no federally-mandated drinking water standards and only a patchwork of regulations among provinces.

Water testing standards and practices vary greatly across the country, and are nonexistent in some provinces. Meanwhile, the public remains largely in the dark about the quality of their drinking water. This is unacceptable at a time when higher standards are the norm in other countries, and there is no shortage of lessons to learn from.

It's been well-documented that many cities in the United States, including Flint, Newark, and Pittsburgh, have dangerous levels of lead in the drinking water coming out of their taps. In the infamous case of Flint, Michigan, 12 people died from Legionnaires disease caused by the mismanagement of water and lead leaching from water pipes. In Canada, we have read the stories and echoed the calls for action to address this crisis. Yet, this latest report revealed that lead levels in Prince Rupert, Saskatoon, Moose Jaw, Regina and Montreal are equal to or higher than the ones in Flint at the height of its lead crisis. A major difference is that in Canada, there aren't official requirements to test and report to residents about their drinking water, something that has been in place in the United States since 1991. This lack of transparency confirms the federal government's inaction when it comes

to fulfilling the human right to water. This news caused public outcry among residents from Montreal to Prince Rupert.

At the same time, we must also acknowledge the more than 100 First Nations communities that have been fighting for safe, clean drinking water for over 20 years. Today, nearly 100 First Nations communities are still under short-term or long-term drinking water advisories, while navigating the colonial government's bureaucracy and fighting for their right to self-governance.

The Trudeau government's commitment to provide safe drinking water to First Nations has been significantly undercut by what Pam Palmater, a Mi'kmaw lawyer from Eel River Bar First Nation and Chair in Indigenous Governance at Ryerson University in Toronto, called their "shell games with reporting on water advisories," "purposeful, discriminatory underfunding," and "lack of long-term commitment." Improving standards and fixing drinking water problems across Canada cannot exclude real, lasting solutions to provide safe, clean drinking water to First Nations communities.

How does lead get into our drinking water? The water leaving municipal treatment plants is lead-free, but lead enters the water through the network of antiquated lead pipes. These

aging pipes are part of the crumbling water and wastewater infrastructure problem that plagues municipalities across the country. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities estimates that municipalities need \$50 billion to upgrade their water and wastewater infrastructure in poor or very poor conditions. Yet, the federal solution to decades of underfunding has been to welcome private investors to finance, build and operate our infrastructure through the Canada Infrastructure Bank. Canadians cannot be forced to choose between lead-laced water and privatized water at higher rates.

Federally-mandated drinking water standards cannot come without a funding commitment from the federal government in the form of investments or low-cost, public loans. In 2012, the federal government imposed new standards for sewage treatment on municipalities, but the confusing roll out and inadequate funding resulted in a total exercise in frustration. To take one example, in Newfoundland and Labrador, cities and towns are struggling to come up with \$600 million to bring their wastewater infrastructure up to federal code by 2020 or they face steep fines.

Decades of a lack of federal oversight and underfunding of public infrastructure have resulted in this massive public health crisis. While some immediate solutions, like treating water with

anti-corrosives, are available, it will take nothing less than a comprehensive approach and serious commitment from all levels of government to address this crisis, both in major cities and remote First Nations communities.

Canadians have bought into the "myth of abundance." We often take for granted the water that comes out of our tap every day. Luckily, people are choosing to act to protect their water locally through the Blue Communities Project (Read more on pages 6 and 7).

As the newly elected minority Liberal government is in its early stages, we urgently need a Ministry of Water that will respect the rights and sovereignty of Indigenous peoples to their land and water, implement federally reinforced drinking water standards, implement the human right to water and sanitation, ensure public funding to upgrade water infrastructure, and protect our waterways and groundwater.

Most importantly, we need a public movement – like the one created with Blue Communities – that will continue to hold our government accountable every step of the way. With the new minority government, we have a critical opportunity to do just that. Our health – and our children's health – is on the line.

Vi Bui is the Water Campaigner for the Council of Canadians.



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