

# Ottawa must act to end First Nations water crisis identified in Human Rights Watch report: Editorial

A leading human rights group has released a report urging Ottawa to clean up water systems on 85 First Nations reserves. The Liberal government should heed the call immediately.



Residents test water at the Red Earth First Nation reserve, northeast of Prince Albert, Sask. (GEOFF HOWE / CP)

Tues., June 7, 2016

Toronto Star

In a nation as rich as ours, one that contains 20 per cent of the world's fresh water, no one should have to fear what flows through their tap.

Yet a damning new [report](#) by a leading U.S.-based human rights group concludes that many First Nations communities across Ontario are being deprived of their right to clean water.

As of January 2016, drinking water advisories were in effect in 85 reserves across Canada, most of them in this province. More startling, roughly 36 per cent of those advisories had been in place for 10 years or more — some for more than 20.

That means in some communities a generation has grown up not knowing what it's like to drink from a tap or even shower without worrying about E. coli or the various other poisons Human Rights Watch discovered in the reserves' untreated water.

"[T]he Canadian government has violated a range of international human rights obligations toward First Nations persons and communities by failing to remedy the severe water crisis," the report concludes. Ottawa should be ashamed.

The record of government failure on this issue is long and ugly. Despite billions spent over the past few decades on water treatment facilities in First Nations communities, the problem has scarcely improved.

As the report details, that's largely because past investments were erratic and arbitrarily allocated, often failing to take into account the particular sociological and economic realities of the reserves in question.

The Harper government preferred to ignore the issue altogether. Over the last five years, the department now known as Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada returned more than \$1 billion to the Treasury Board, deeming the money "surplus." Surely some of those funds might have been well spent trying to secure non-poisonous drinking water for the thousands of First Nations people who, for years, have been forced to boil before they drink.

The current situation is [devastating](#) for both the health and spiritual well-being of those living in these communities.

One woman from Grassy Narrows First Nation in Northwestern Ontario, identified in the report as Debora C, says the tap water in her home caused her 9-year-old son to acquire a debilitating skin disease that resists most antibiotics. She's had to resort to sponge-bathing him with costly bottled water. Others from the community described travelling the 500 kilometres to Thunder Bay just to take a bath.

Grassy Narrows, of course, was in the news last week for a separate water crisis — the pollution of its sacred waterways and poisoning of its food supply by industrial mercury seepage. In that, too, Ottawa and Queen's Park are complicit. These governments promise a new, more respectful relationship with indigenous peoples. But how much are communities like Grassy Narrows expected to endure in the meantime?

Thankfully, on the drinking-water issue, the new federal government has indicated a willingness to act. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced in March that Ottawa would invest \$4.6 billion in infrastructure in aboriginal communities over the next five years, including for water and waste-water systems.

In implementing this welcome measure, Trudeau should be careful not to repeat the mistakes of governments past. The Human Rights Watch report warns that new investments won't be effective unless accompanied by enforceable regulations, as well as mechanisms to track progress. That's how off-reserve water systems are kept safe. There's no reason the same precautions shouldn't apply in these communities.

The Human Rights Watch report is a blot on our international reputation. Ours is a country too rich in money and water to accept the reality it describes.