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Potential Delay in Ending Long-term Boil Water Advisories Unacceptable

Clean water to support improved health and safety is needed now more than ever

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ANISHINAABE AND DAKOTA TERRITORY, MB — The Southern Chief's Organization (SCO) is calling on the federal government to fulfill its promise of ending long-term boil water advisories. SCO also states that any potential delay in ending the advisories is unacceptable. The government is claiming that the COVID-19 pandemic is the reason for the delay, however the pandemic is the reason why now, more than ever, First Nations need access to clean and safe drinking water.

“The potential abandonment of the promise to end long-term boil water advisories on-reserve by March 2021 is deeply concerning,” said SCO Grand Chief Jerry Daniels. “The COVID-19 pandemic cannot be blamed for the government’s potential failure to deliver on a promise made five years ago during their campaign.”

In last week’s Speech from the Throne, the federal government referred to the need to end long-term boil water advisories across the country, yet there was no specific reference to the original goal of ending all long-term advisories by March of 2021. The government did, however, clearly refer to the March 2021 deadline in the 2019 Speech from the Throne. The government is now saying that due to COVID-19 and restrictions on access to some communities, it may no longer make the original deadline.

“In the past six months, we have seen the federal government take action in many different ways to better the lives of Canadians throughout the pandemic. When are they going to give us the same level of effort to benefit our lives and communities, and ensure all First Nations have access to safe drinking water, which is a basic human right?” asked Grand Chief Daniels.

The federal government has lifted 91 advisories since November 2015. However, 63 remain. That number has grown since last week, as two short-term advisories became long-term this past weekend. Three of the long-term advisories are in Manitoba, and currently, there is a class action lawsuit that includes Hollow Water First Nation seeking compensation from the federal government for First Nations that have lived or are living under drinking water advisories. The number of long-term advisories also do not encompass all the cases where water is deemed to be safe, but is still of low quality.

The federal government has said that a priority during the pandemic is keeping people safe and healthy. In Manitoba, there is an 11-year gap in the life expectancy between First Nation peoples and non-First Nation Manitobans. Access to clean drinking water is one way to begin to address the disparity in health outcomes for First Nation peoples.

“The federal government can’t delay any longer. There is no excuse for any community to not have access to fresh, clean drinking water,” concluded Grand Chief Daniels. “The federal government must fulfil its longstanding promise, and grant us the same access to clean water as all other Canadians.”

Due to generations of displacement from our lands, poor infrastructure, and systemic neglect, First Nations have become the most vulnerable population in Canada when it comes to water quality and access. SCO is currently working to build a Water Authority in our territories to protect and guarantee safe water sources and infrastructure for southern First Nations in Manitoba.

The Southern Chiefs’ Organization represents 34 First Nations in what is now called southern Manitoba. SCO is an independent political organization that protects, preserves, promotes, and enhances First Nations peoples’ inherent rights, languages, customs, and traditions through the application and implementation of the spirit and intent of the Treaty-making process.

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