

WATER IS LIFE

The fight for clean drinking water continues

How long have Indigenous peoples struggled to access clean water?

For hundreds of years, many First Nation, Inuit and Métis communities have struggled with access to clean drinking water, as well as other necessities like quality food and safe housing. The impacts of colonization and ongoing colonialism for Indigenous peoples in Canada include a lack of access to basic needs and rights such as housing, equitable education and employment opportunities, and clean drinking water.

The current federal government has zeroed in on ending long-term boil water advisories in First Nation communities. But that's just the start of what's needed to end decades of water injustice and discrimination once and for all.

In 1876, the federal government introduced the *Indian Act*. Under the *Act*, the government is responsible for building and upkeep of infrastructure on First Nation reserves such as drinking water treatment plants and pipes to deliver water to homes and other buildings.

Since then, the federal government has chronically underfunded First Nation reserves, including water infrastructure needs. Governments have harmed access to clean water for Indigenous peoples in many other ways. One example is the forced relocation of Indigenous peoples onto reserves that were sometimes very far from their traditional territories. Government inaction on pollution and industrial accidents caused by corporations has also harmed water sources.



The focus on long-term boil water advisories in First Nation communities is just the start of ending water injustice and discrimination once and for all.



Today, many Indigenous peoples still do not have access to clean drinking water. This violates the internationally recognized human right to water. In 2015, Justin Trudeau committed to end boil water advisories by 2021. That deadline has passed and while many long-term boil water advisories have ended, the Liberal government says many communities won't have long-term solutions until 2026.

How could this have gone on for so long?

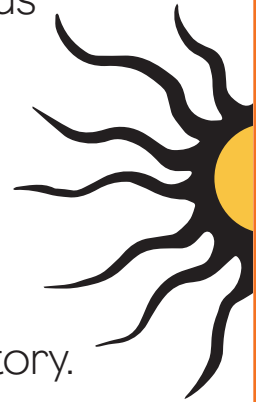
Many Indigenous peoples and allies have wondered the same thing! For decades, one federal government after another has made commitments to provide Indigenous peoples with safe drinking water. But no government has delivered adequate funding to build and maintain drinking and wastewater water treatment plants, as well as appropriate pipe systems to connect the plants to homes, or provide enough trained and fairly-paid staff to run the systems.



Over the last several hundred years, most Indigenous communities and Nations have faced threats to clean drinking water.



Many Indigenous peoples and communities are left out, and federal statistics don't tell the whole story.



Which Indigenous peoples are affected?

The question of which communities or how many communities are impacted by not having access to clean drinking water is not simple, but one thing is clear: over the last several hundred years, most Indigenous communities and Nations have faced threats to clean drinking water.

The federal government limits which Indigenous peoples it has financial and legal responsibilities to for clean drinking water. The Liberal government pledge to end boil-water advisories in First Nation communities only covers long-term drinking water advisories for water systems serving five or more homes on First Nation reserves, which the government refers to as 'public systems.' The government is not focusing on fixing piping into homes, or on homes with no piping that rely on large tanks of water called cisterns, or on supporting wastewater treatment systems, which are vital to protect safe drinking water.

Many Indigenous peoples and communities are left out of these specific efforts. In addition, federal tracking statistics don't tell the whole story, as they don't count First Nation communities living under short-term water advisories, most Métis people, Inuit people, all communities north of the 60th parallel, seven member First Nations of the Saskatoon Tribal Council, First Nations people who use wells and private water systems and First Nation reserves in British Columbia.

Inuit and some other communities receive separate federal funding, but it is important to note how many Indigenous peoples are affected by a lack of clean drinking water, and who is excluded from the federal campaign to end boil water advisories.

What's it like to live under a long-term boil water advisory?

Some First Nations have endured decades of boiling their water before it's safe to drink. Members of Shoal Lake 40 First Nation lived under a long-term boil water advisory for 24 years, from 1997 until 2021, when the construction of effective roads made the building and upkeep of a new water treatment plant possible.

June 2022 marked 10,000 days that members of Neskantaga First Nation have lived under a long-term boil water advisory. Since 1995, their tap water has at times been unsafe even for bathing or laundry, known as a 'do not use' advisory.

Communities without safe drinking water must spend large amounts of money supplying members with bottled water and must deal with

the mountains of plastic waste that pile up. Households often must ration drinking water and water for bathing and cleaning. Water that is unsafe to drink, but deemed safe enough for bathing, can cause skin conditions such as eczema and infections.

Communities living with water they can't use at all struggle to have clean clothes and find safe places to bathe. Community members must factor the timing, costs, and logistics of picking up water into their everyday lives. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected Indigenous communities more than non-Indigenous communities. A significant factor is inadequate access to clean water for drinking or doing additional washing and hygiene to prevent the spread of the virus. One recent study found that Indigenous communities with water cisterns had double the cases of COVID-19 compared to communities with running water to their homes.



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What about short-term boil water advisories?

Short-term boil water advisories are a big problem! As of May 2022, there were 30 short-term drinking advisories in First Nations communities south of the 60th parallel (excluding communities in British Columbia and that are members of the Saskatoon Tribal Council). Often communities will have their boil-water advisory or other water advisory removed, and then a few weeks or months later, they will receive a short-term boil water advisory.

Listen, learn and act

Indigenous peoples have been fighting threats to their clean drinking water for generations. It is vital to recognize the strength and dignity of Indigenous peoples who have been impacted by these conditions, and who have fought for change. The work of Indigenous activists and allies is what has led to government commitments advancing the work to ensure access to clean drinking water for Indigenous people.

CUPE's *Water is life* campaign provides educational tools to learn about Indigenous water issues and mobilize in support of Indigenous peoples and allies to protect and fix the water. For a list of ways to support Indigenous communities fighting for clean drinking water, check out *Water is life: Listen, learn, act*.



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Helpful language to understand what Indigenous communities are facing:

Boil water advisory (BWA): Home users should bring their tap water to a rolling boil for at least one minute before they drink the water or use the water to cook, feed pets, brush teeth, wash fruits and vegetables, and other purposes.

Long-term BWA: A boil water advisory that has been in place for over a year.

Short-term BWA: A boil water advisory that has been in place for less than a year.

Public water system: Indigenous Services Canada refers to on-reserve water systems serving five or more households, or serving schools, community centres and other public facilities, as public water systems.