

June 18, 2008

## ***Fit to Drink: Challenges in Providing Safe Drinking Water in British Columbia***

### **Report Highlights**

#### **Background**

It has been five years since the *Drinking Water Protection Act (DWPA)* and the *Drinking Water Protection Regulation (DWPR)* came into effect. While progress has been made since then, our investigation shows that further work is required to ensure all British Columbians have access to safe drinking water. One of the themes of the report is increasing public access to information on drinking water quality (see, for example, recommendations R12.1, R18, R22 and R24, pages 59, 74, 78 and 80).

#### **Dealing with Questions, Concerns and Complaints**

We concluded that the regional health authorities, the Ministry of Health and the Office of the Provincial Health Officer do not have well-developed informal complaint processes, that there is very little information available to the public about how to make a complaint, and that generally, they are not well tracked. *The Ombudsman recommended the development of written complaints policies and systems to electronically record and track complaints (see R1.1 and R1.2, page 39).*

Under section 29 of the *DWPA* a person can request an investigation by a drinking water officer if they believe there is a threat to their drinking water. Our investigation shows there is a lack of publicly available information about how to make such a request, and that only five requests have been received since 2003. In only two of these cases was an investigation actually conducted. *The Ombudsman recommended that the health authorities develop written materials to inform the public of the right to request an investigation under section 29, and that all future requests be recorded (see R3 and R4, page 44).*

#### **Public Advisories and Notices**

As of May 2008, there were 528 boil water advisories in effect in British Columbia. There were also 49 water quality advisories and a province-wide advisory for people with weakened or compromised immune systems. *Among the Ombudsman's recommendations is that the regional health authorities commit to reducing the number of boil water advisories in effect by 10 per cent per year. The Ombudsman also recommended that the Ministry of Health support the regional health authorities in achieving this goal (see R16 and R16.1, page 64).*

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## **Monitoring and Enforcement**

The investigation identifies deficiencies in sampling, inspections and enforcement. For example, B.C. requires only two microbiological tests on all drinking water systems, which are for E. coli and total coliform bacteria. Other Canadian jurisdictions, including Alberta, Nova Scotia and Ontario, regulate a wider range of substances. *Among the Ombudsman's recommendations is that by June 1, 2009, the Ministry of Health reassess whether to adopt additional mandatory drinking water standards (see R19, page 74).* This would support the province's goal of having the best water quality in the world.

The investigation shows that the regional health authorities are not using the full range of enforcement options available to them under the DWPA and DWPR. For example, violation tickets and orders are rarely issued, and health authorities generally appear to be reluctant to escalate enforcement. This is inconsistent with the government's direction to water suppliers in 2003, which said that, "tolerance shown to non-complying systems in the past will not be afforded to systems in the future." *The Ombudsman recommended that the regional health authorities use the full range of enforcement options available to them (see R27, page 85).*

## **Issues Affecting Small Systems**

The report identifies challenges that small system operators face under the DWPA and DWPR. These challenges include operator certification and training, emergency planning and conducting regular sampling. *Among the Ombudsman's recommendations is that the Ministry of Health develop a coordinated small systems strategy (see R33, page 101).*

While there are estimates of the number of small systems that exist, many still remain unidentified, and therefore unregulated. *The Ombudsman has recommended that the Ministry of Health and health authorities increase their efforts to identify and regulate small water systems (see R31 and R32, page 99).*

## **Drinking Water Information Management Systems**

The Ministry of Environment and the Ministry of Health have recognized the need for a single comprehensive database to manage information about drinking water since 2002, but no such system is yet in place. *As the Ministry of Health is the lead agency on this project, the Ombudsman recommended it ensure that a comprehensive drinking water information system is in place by December 31, 2009 (see R34, page 107).*

Special Report No. 32, *Fit to Drink: Challenges in Providing Safe Drinking Water in British Columbia* is available at [www.ombudsman.bc.ca](http://www.ombudsman.bc.ca).

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