

Natives still unhappy with water

Survey finds big budget hasn't helped quality

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OTTAWA - Despite government programs that have poured \$1.6 billion into First Nations water systems since 2003, more than one-third of those who live on reserves still believe their water is unsafe to drink.

The finding comes from a survey of 1,502 First Nations residents conducted last summer by Ekos for Health Canada. The study looks at whether those living on reserves think their water has improved since the federal government launched the First Nations Water Management Strategy in 2003 -- two years before a crisis at Ontario's Kashechewan reserve catapulted the problems to national attention.

By the time it ends in March, the five-year federal program will have pumped \$600 million into water quality programs in First Nations communities. That's over and above \$1 billion in normal spending on water initiatives by Indian and Northern Affairs during the same period.

In a speech last month, Chuck Strahl, the minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, boasted that the government's efforts are bearing fruit. The number of aboriginal communities with high-risk water systems has now been cut to 97 from almost 200 in March 2006, Strahl told the Assembly of First Nations.

The Ekos survey, dated August 2007, suggests many First Nations residents aren't convinced things are improving. Just 44 per cent rate the quality of their drinking water as good, and a further 22 per cent rate it as moderate. Fully a third describe it as poor. Those numbers haven't changed since 2005.

David Schindler, a University of Alberta professor, said the government's standard response is to heavily chlorinate water supplies. But native people often won't drink chlorinated water because it tastes bad and some fear it causes bladder cancer.

Schindler points to a reverse osmosis system developed by Hans Peterson, executive director of the Saskatoon-based Safe Drinking Water Foundation. The system uses a pre-filter to eliminate compounds that clog conventional reverse-osmosis filters.

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