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\$330M will fund improvements to drinking water on First Nations

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REGINA -- The federal government is investing \$330 million over the next two years to improve the drinking water on First Nations.

How much of that money will flow into this province is not clear being that Saskatchewan First Nations' water supply has been well-maintained.

"Water facilities have always been a priority in Saskatchewan. For a number of reserves we have invested fairly heavily in improving the water facilities on reserve even prior to the strategies that have presented in recent years," said Trevor Sutter, a spokesman for Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

According to the Health Canada Web site there are currently 92 First Nations under a drinking water advisory in Canada. There are 21 communities in five provinces that have high-risk water systems and drinking water advisories -- Ontario with eight, B.C. with seven, Alberta with three, New Brunswick with two, and Quebec with one.

There are 85 sites on 70 First Nations in Saskatchewan and all 85 require fully qualified water treatment operators, said Sutter.

"Only 10 do not have their certification or are in the process of getting their certification for those sites," said Sutter. "This means 88 per cent of our sites have operators with the necessary certification, which is fairly good."

He said efforts are continuing to ensure that all sites have fully qualified operators.

According to Sutter there were seven medium-risk sites in northern Saskatchewan. However Health Canada reports there are currently 15 drinking water advisories in the province.

Sutter said to ensure safe drinking water, communities are assessed using a combination of criteria such as: The water source; infrastructure and design adequacy of the facility; operation and maintenance of the system; the operator training and certification; and record-keeping and reporting.

"We look at all those and there is a rating system that applies nationally," said Sutter. "There are no high-risk sites in this area."

He said INAC is not involved with the water quality testing. Instead that's the responsibility of Health Canada and in some cases the tribal councils.

"We're more on the infrastructure portion of it," said Sutter. "We do advise when there is a stop-drinking water advisory put out."

File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) Vice-Chairman Myke Agecoutay said the tribal council serves 11 First Nations.

"We do an excellent job to ensure that our First Nations are delivering the safest drinking water possible," he said.

He said water quality is monitored through its Water Quality Monitoring Program. Agecoutay explained the tribal council has two environmental officers who work in compliance with rules and regulations established by the environment ministry. Each First Nation has its own water treatment plant officers who are overseen by the FHQTC Water Systems Oversight Officer. There are also four water quality monitors who do the bacterial sampling and chlorine level testing. All employees update their training every two years.

"The (FHQTC) has one of Saskatchewan's best water quality monitoring programs," said Agecoutay. "We are always busy and certainly we are very busy ensuring that good water gets to good people."

Also announced Tuesday was a drinking water advisory toolkit. The toolkit is to be used to make it easier and faster for First Nations communities to communicate essential information to residents when a water advisory is issued.

Since the national action plan was announced, 108 of 193 communities have been removed from a high-risk category.

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