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Polluted water persists; Six Nations waits for federal help with problem discovered in 2004

Donna and Jody Hill say they long ago gave up hope that the federal government will help fix the problem of contaminated wells on Six Nations land.

"You see how grey she is getting while we wait?" Jody Hill asks, his frustration showing as he points to his mother's hair.

"We're all getting grey waiting.

"If it happens, it happens," he continues, as the two sat in the kitchen of the small family home on Fifth Line, a few kilometres outside Ohsweken in Tuscarora Township.

"But you can't hope for it."

The Hills haven't used their well water for drinking or cooking for years. They're among the hundreds who drive a few times a week to the public works facility in Ohsweken to fill jugs with safe water. "The well gets underground water so you know it's no good anywhere around here," said Donna Hill. "It's never going to be the same again.

"We can't expect help. It's too late. The elders long ago said the day would come when we would be buying water."

The Hills could be forgiven for the rampant cynicism that pervades their kitchen-table talk. It reflected the feeling of many residents about the federal government's slow response to a general water crisis at Six Nations, marked by widespread contamination of rural wells and an aging, obsolete water treatment plant in Ohsweken.

Four years ago this month, on March 30, 2004, then-chief councillor Roberta Jamieson called a public meeting where Six Nations residents heard the awful confirmation of a problem many believed had existed for years: most wells in Tuscarora Township were dangerously polluted.

Results from a water study of 312 randomly selected wells among a total 2,200 on Six Nations revealed that hundreds were contaminated with potentially deadly bacteria, and more than one-quarter contained dangerous levels of E.coli.

An alarming 82 per cent of wells contained coliforms - a sign of fecal contamination. Sodium counts were five times higher than the standard set by the Ministry of the Environment regarding potential threats to health, such as heart disease, kidney disease or hypertension.

A general boil-water advisory was issued for the rural area. Large volumes of water were trucked in and residents were given jugs to fill with safe water at the public works yard.

Jamieson and the elected band council of the day began a high-profile public campaign, lobbying for action from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada.

A more thorough study was completed a year later by consultant Neegan Burnside Engineering and Environmental Ltd. It confirmed the disconcerting findings of the preliminary report.

Neegan Burnside also offered 14 recommendations regarding the inspection of wells, necessary repairs to those in use, and the capping and decommissioning of hundreds already abandoned to limit the spread of contamination throughout the ground water and ways of fixing the problem.

The band council began work on a proposal to have all the rural wells replaced by a new system, with 67 kilometres of pipe running running back and forth across the rural territory. The proposition would require three to four years to build. But the high cost - an estimated \$125 million - played against its feasibility.

Council continued to lobby Indian and Northern Affairs Canada through Liberal and Conservative minority governments, all through the remainder of Jamieson's term and the terms of the next two chiefs, David General and now Bill Montour.

Four years, three chiefs and as many councils after that initial public meeting, very little progress has been made while residents wait, and keep driving into Ohsweken for water.

Brant Liberal MP Lloyd St. Amand, who has been in office for most of the period, said he has continued to press successive ministers in the Indian and Northern Affairs portfolio about the problem.

"This community has been under a boil-water advisory for four years," he said.

"I've tried to convey the unfairness - frankly, the inhumanity - of having so many people at Six Nations having to boil their water or bring it in from the outside."

St. Amand also said he has questioned former Conservative minister Jim Prentice and now Chuck Strahl about the apparent lack of progress.

"The responses have not been satisfactory," he said.

The Expositor called Strahl's ministerial office to seek an interview about Six Nations water issues. Strahl did not respond. Instead, an information officer in the department, Tony Prudori, called back to say he had been directed to take questions.

Prudori, spokesman for the department's Ontario region, said department officials are working with the Six Nations council and the band administration on the feasibility and specifics of a potential communal well system.

He also noted that so far, the department has paid about \$800,000 to provide free bottled water to elderly, infant and immune-suppressed band members.

Even chief's water has E coli

Chief Montour said he understands the frustration because his own well is contaminated with E.coli and he has to buy bottled water.

He said he believes there is a greater chance to find a solution now that officials are looking at newer, less expensive technology. One example he gave is new ultrafiltration membrane technology - particularly the Zenon Homespring UF200 model, which can be used on treated municipal water and untreated well or lake water.

He said installation would cost \$3,500 to \$4,000 per household, for a total bill of between \$8.8 million and \$10 million.

Meanwhile, residents in Ohsweken are growing impatient over the lack of a signed agreement for a new water plant.

St. Amand extracted a commitment from the outgoing Liberal government in the 2005 federal election. He persuaded former housing minister Joe Fontana and former Indian affairs minister Andy Scott that the current plant could not handle Ohsweken current needs, let alone future ones in a town ripe with demand for expansion.

But when Stephen Harper's minority Conservative government was elected in January 2006, the project quickly fell off the Ontario capital plan.

St. Amand spares no words of criticism over the apparent inability of the Conservative government to carry out the project.

Two weeks ago, St. Amand filed a question to Strahl, wondering where the \$10 million was.

"We all know that aboriginal issues are not a priority for the government, but surely providing people with safe drinking water is the government's minimum obligation," St. Amand said when his turn came up in question period. "When will Six Nations receive the necessary \$10 million?"

Strahl's parliamentary secretary, MP Rod Bruinooge, responded with a statement that did not answer the question.

"When our government first took office, we had a situation where 193 First Nations communities across the country had water that was not drinkable," said Bruinooge. "We have brought that number down to 83."

But he gave no information about the \$10 million or the prospective Ohsweken plant.

"Here we are 2 1/2 years later, the \$10-million commitment has been made, yet not a penny has yet been provided to Six Nations for a new facility," he said.

"To my mind, the Harper government has had enough time to make good on that commitment. I'm extremely disappointed," he said.

"One would have hoped that the Conservative government would have seen that it was fulfilled as soon as possible after being elected. They don't have to start from square one. All the major work has already been done. Not following through on the commitment has not helped in overall negotiations with Six Nations on land claims and other issues."

Montour says more progress has been made of late, and he's confident a final agreement to proceed will be won soon.

The day after he was sworn into office in early December, Montour went to Ottawa to find out what happened to the money. After more lobbying efforts, Montour and the band administration were finally successful in having the project reinstated in the capital plan, for 2009 and 2010.

It can't come too soon, he said. There are 600 families on the waiting list for housing, and 10 to 15 businesses can't get started because of a lack of potable water.

"Without solutions to our water problems, we can't build," said Montour.

"My biggest worry, though, is if the current plant went down ... if we had a fire in Ohsweken, we wouldn't have enough water to take care of it.

"But now that the project is back on the capital plan, I'm hoping we can get into the ground sometime in the fall. We have a team working full time on this. I keep cheering them on."

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