

Ministerial Statement on the Occasion of Drinking Water Week
May 3rd, 2004
The Honourable Colin Hansen, Minister of Health Services

I am pleased to express my support for Drinking Water Week. The drinking water industry touches consumers all day, every day, and British Columbians are grateful to those whose efforts ensure we have continuous, clean, fresh water.

We are committed to providing safe, reliable and accessible drinking water for all British Columbians. In 2000 we introduced our comprehensive 'Source to Tap' Action Plan for Safe Drinking Water, and on May 16, 2003, we enacted the amended *Drinking Water Protection Act* and Drinking Water Protection Regulation.

We've allocated \$2 million per year in base funding to hire new drinking water protection staff at the health authority level. This includes both public health inspectors and professional engineers who are working alongside existing staff. The new Provincial Drinking Water Officer, along with the Provincial Health Officer and the Council on Drinking Water, will be developing the oversight and accountability framework included in the new legislation.

In addition to new staff, we've formed a Council on Drinking Water. This Council includes members from each of the health authorities, the office of the Provincial Health Officer and the Health Protection branch of the Ministry of Health Services. We asked the Council to take a leadership role with the 5 regional health authorities in ensuring standardization as drinking water programs move forward across the province. The Council is overseeing the development and implementation of: a policy and procedures manual for drinking water officers; an assessment toolkit to assist suppliers to conduct assessments of their systems; and best management practice guidelines developed with the help of the BCWWA.

Our Action Plan requires that tap water be regularly monitored and meet acceptable safety standards. The *Drinking Water Protection Act* requires increased inspection and testing. In addition to the monitoring requirements of the *Drinking Water Protection Act* and its regulation, conditions are being placed on operating permits that will require specific monitoring for individual water supply systems.

The 15 Laboratories that are currently approved by the Provincial Health Officer also have new requirements. The most important is that when *E.coli* or fecal coliforms are detected in water samples, they must be reported immediately to the drinking water officer and directly to the supplier. This is in addition to the reporting of other results on a regular basis. The requirement for chemical monitoring has not changed and continues to be based on an evaluation of concerns specific to a given water system.

The BC Centre for Disease Control is developing a broader network of microbiological laboratories across the province that will ensure all water suppliers have timely access to approved laboratory services. We have increased funding to the BCCDC to assist them in meeting the increased monitoring and reporting needs of the new regulations.

We understand that small water systems face unique challenges that require flexible solutions. Although small systems provide water for a significant number of people in their geographic area, they often lack the financial resources and trained technical expertise that are part of larger systems.

After the introduction of the Act, the Ministry began discussing how to fairly implement new standards with the small system operators. With the help of the BCWWA we have spoken with over 300 owners and operators of small water systems. They have offered their opinions on where legislation challenges the capacity of small systems, and suggested options for improvement. We are now working with a smaller group of small system owners and operators, and other effected parties to develop a business analysis. Once complete, we will move forward with an improved management strategy that will ensure small water systems have greater flexibility in meeting health standards for services they provide. The newly formed Small Water System Association will help represent the interests of the smaller water supply systems. We will continue to look at new approaches to accommodate the needs of small systems.

The integrity of our water treatment and distribution system is one of our most important needs for protecting human health. It's important to recognize the need for upgrading infrastructure. What many water suppliers view as assets are often more of a liability. Without an accounting system in place to support a comprehensive maintenance and replacement program, treatment plants and distribution systems will deteriorate. Eventually, the cost of upgrading failing systems is more than the expense if we had maintained the system from the start.

We have tried to encourage amalgamation of small systems with larger systems owned by local government. Unfortunately, it seems that often when a local government examines the smaller system they find that the infrastructure of the smaller system is poor. Of course, this raises the question of whether or not amalgamation makes sense for the larger system. So it's important that water suppliers focus on long-term planning. We must continue to explore new technologies that can help improve the quality and accessibility of our drinking water.

One of the most significant new requirements of the Act and regulation, is the need to have operators certified to ensure that any water supplier will be able to meet certification requirements. Certification is being managed through the Environmental Operators Certification Program.

Many smaller water systems have not yet obtained their system classification. If you manage a water supply that hasn't yet been classified or doesn't have certified operators, please be proactive in contacting the Environmental Operators Certification Program.

In 2003, various regions in the province experienced drought conditions. As you know, when we have a drought situation, we get a domino effect – reservoirs, lakes and other sources with less water are more stagnant, and water quality is impacted. The weather so far this spring indicates that we will experience similar conditions this summer season and we know it's important to learn from last year's drought as we implement the province's drought management plan this year.

Land and Water BC will take the lead in this. However, water conservation is the responsibility of all British Columbians. We will do our part to remind British Columbians to be responsible when using our water resources. As water suppliers, you should be prepared to increase monitoring if needed, and consider alternate sources of water supply if we do face a drought situation this summer.

Ground water is generally clean, healthy and plentiful in British Columbia. A large number of British Columbians rely on aquifers for their drinking water supply. For some time, independent reports, like the Drinking Water Review Panel, have called for increased source water protection. As many of you know, BC is the last jurisdiction in Canada without comprehensive

regulations to protect its ground water. We refer to the Sanitary regulations for protection of individual wells, and that is a regulation which dates back to the early 1900's.

As part of our New Era document, this government committed to passing ground water legislation to safeguard and improve the quality of British Columbians' drinking water. That process began with the *Drinking Water Protection Act* and regulation that was announced on May 16, last year. It will continue with ground water protection regulations that will soon be announced by Minister Barisoff from the Ministry of Water, Land and Air Protection. These regulations will be another step forward in our Action Plan to improve drinking water quality for British Columbians. The focus of the first set of regulations that have been prepared by the Ministry of WLAP is on protection of drinking water.

Another issue that requires attention in many communities is cross-connection control. We recognize that cross-connection of treated and untreated water lines can lead to contamination of drinking water at the tap in any water supply. That's why when we brought the Drinking Water Protection Regulation in we included a requirement for a cross-connection control program as part of an assessment response plan. Controls on cross connections are a critical measure to protect the quality of the consumers water. Drinking water officers will require cross-connection control programs for all water supply systems, regardless of whether an assessment has been ordered. One of the best management practices that the BCWWA is working on with us is the development of a cross connection control program. This document will provide assistance for all types of water supply systems.

Information management is another key to our drinking water industry. We are funding a drinking water information management project that will provide a common link or bridge to all government data related to the Action Plan for Safe Drinking Water. The Ministry of Health Services is leading this project, in partnership with seven provincial ministries and one Crown Corporation. The project will build on the rich information management capacity within the Ministry of Sustainable Resource Management. Land use, water quality and water management data will be collected on a single platform. This will help those who manage drinking water meet their business needs, and measure their progress and improvements.

All of these initiatives together will ensure our drinking water is safe now and in the future. The BC Water and Wastewater Association has been an important partner in our work to improve drinking water protection in this province. We are truly fortunate in BC to have such a dedicated industry partner that is willing to work with us to achieve our goals.

The Premier considers the safety and security of British Columbians to be one of his most important concerns. Families need to feel secure that the water they drink is safe for grandmothers, parents, children and pets. The Premier cares passionately about that sense of security and because of that, he's made safe drinking water a priority for this government. Together we are developing the best water protection system in the country. Because one thing that won't change for British Columbians, is the need for clean, safe, accessible drinking water.