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Ministry of Health

EXPERT REPORT PROVIDES ADVICE ON DRINKING WATER SAFETY

VICTORIA – Management of drinking water systems, including the effectiveness of water quality advisories, could be improved with more consistent risk assessment and more understandable public communication, an internationally recognized committee of water experts reported to Health Minister George Abbott.

“British Columbians overall have a safe, clean supply of drinking water; however, from time to time, drinking water advisories are put into place to notify the public about potential risk of that supply,” said Abbott. “The recommendations and advice of this expert panel will assist us in moving forward with health authorities, water suppliers and local government to ensure a more consistent provincial approach to managing our drinking water systems, including assessing the need for and in communicating water quality advisories in the future.”

The report addresses the different approaches taken across B.C. on how, why and when water quality advisories and boil water notices are issued. It also examines how turbidity is used to measure water quality, how it is monitored and the human health risk. Turbidity is the cloudiness that can occur in water, caused by small particles. The committee specifically looked at the relationship between turbidity and gastrointestinal illness and reported that turbidity by itself does not indicate or explain occurrences of infectious diseases.

Finding that advisories are often misunderstood by the public and that long-standing advisories are often ignored, the technical advisory committee suggested ways to improve the effectiveness of advisories, including setting criteria for the lifting of advisories at the time the advisory is issued, enhancing the advisory information with more user-friendly explanations, and providing more consistent information – between health authorities, water suppliers and local government – to ensure all affected parties have an equal and fulsome understanding of the issues.

In consultation with health authorities, the water supply community, and local governments, the Ministry of Health will now begin to develop future policy ideas and recommendations based on the committee’s findings.

“Consistency and appropriateness of risk communications will be examined, as well as the use of alternate means of notifying customers, in particular, vulnerable populations,” said Dr. Eric Young, deputy provincial health officer. “Appropriate treatment alternatives to filtration may also be considered, such as combining UV treatment with chlorination.”

Appointed by the minister in December 2007 in response to concerns expressed by local governments as well as water suppliers, the five-person committee consulted with health authorities and water suppliers, and reviewed relevant national and international documentation, including case studies of water-borne outbreaks of infectious illnesses.

The committee found that drinking water advisories alone cannot completely safeguard drinking water systems. A multi-factor approach examining all components of a drinking water system – including source water protection, drinking water treatment and distribution systems – is needed. Safeguards can include management, monitoring, research, science and technology development, guidelines, standards and objectives, legislative and policy frameworks as well as public involvement and awareness.

“Committee members welcomed the opportunity to provide up-to-date scientific advice on how to best address drinking water quality and notification issues in B.C.,” said Ray Copes, director of environmental health with the BC Centre for Disease Control and a member of the committee that produced the report. “We hope this information will be useful for further securing the safety of drinking water supplies for all British Columbians.”

Many improvements have been made to the province’s drinking water supply under the Drinking Water Protection Act – from investments in new equipment and guidance in the application of the legislation to more certified operators. Through the tripartite Canada-B.C. Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund and Canada-B.C. Infrastructure Program, and the provincial B.C. Community Water Improvement and Towns for Tomorrow programs, around 200 water projects in communities around the province have benefited from over \$360 million in federal and/or provincial funding since 2001.

The report is available online at www.health.gov.bc.ca/protect/dwcommittee.html.

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