

# Contrary advice about drinking water

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Public health: Local officials say it is unsafe to drink, while Health Ministry says it's just fine

A third of the customers of an Okanagan Valley water district whose aquifer is contaminated by nitrates have been told by the province it's unsafe to drink their water despite Health Minister Terry Lake's assurance last week that contamination poses no real public health risk.



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**Cow manure has been associated with both nitrate pollution and E. coli, the bacterial pathogen responsible for the Walkerton, Ont., disaster in which 2,700 people fell ill and seven died.**

Lake was responding in the legislature to questions about a Spallumcheen aquifer upon which the province repeatedly approved spraying millions of litres of liquid cow manure despite its own concerns about contamination. Cow manure has been associated with both nitrate

pollution and E. coli, the bacterial pathogen responsible for the Walkerton, Ont., disaster in which 2,700 people fell ill and seven died. The minister said that while a water quality advisory is in effect, it isn't as serious as a do-not-drink or do-not-use order.

"So while there is a level of risk associated, it does not meet the threshold of a boil-water or a do-not-use order," Lake said. "The Ministry of Environment conducts testing regularly and works with Interior Health to ensure results are shared appropriately and public health is not at risk."

Trustees of the Steele Springs Waterworks District in the township of Spallumcheen, which supplies about 150 residents with the now-contaminated drinking water, say otherwise.

"A water quality advisory is not less important than a boil water advisory, it covers a broad range of risks, nitrate contamination above the maximum acceptable concentration being among the highest," says a letter from board chair Brian Upper to Lake.

The present level of contamination represents "a proven constant risk from which there is no escape unless the source is avoided," the letter says.

The trustees cite a warning from provincial environment protection officer Brian Gregory. They say they were told high nitrate levels are a serious health concern for infants less than three months in age and can also increase the risk of stomach cancer in adults.

Interior Health advises pregnant women, babies under six months of age, seniors and individuals with weakened immune systems, or chronic heart, lung and blood conditions, to use other sources of water, the trustees say.

"Within our population of 150, we have over 50 elderly people, not taking into account those in the same population that have any of the listed risk or health concerns," the letter says. "In your comments you down-played the concern, saying that only small children are at risk. How is it that your environmental protection officer knows more about the risk than you admit knowing, considering your capacity as minister of health?"

The trustees also challenged a statement by Lake that water sampling through most of 2015 showed nitrates within Health Canada guidelines for drinking water and that elevated levels showed up in December tests.

"In reality, the levels were above the maximum acceptable concentration for drinking water for 20 of the 24 months of the advisory, only being lower during the summer months of 2015 when the moisture level was lower," the trustees say.

They say nitrates concentration in the drinking water is now 33 per cent higher than when the province imposed an order requiring government approval for any further application of liquid manure to the field over the water supply.

Meanwhile, other residents drawing water from the contaminated aquifer are resorting to bottled water or installing expensive private water treatment systems.

"We're paying \$800 a year for water we can't drink and private well owners are scared spitless their wells could be contaminated soon," says resident Al Price.

Price says he installed a reverse osmosis and nitrate filtering system at a cost of \$3,000. A neighbouring family of three, he says, resorts to bottled water to drink and cook at a cost of more than \$1,000 a year.

"It really rankles that we are expected to pay through the nose to solve a problem we had no hand in creating and which the government seems to have no desire to solve," he said. "It is disgraceful when you realize there are a number of people on Steele Springs who cannot afford water treatment or bottled water, so they have to just drink whatever comes out of the tap."