

# The history of Canada's hidden drinking water crisis



*An image taken in a Northern Community highlighting the difference in prices between water and other beverage options. (via Human Rights Watch)*

In a first world country, most people don't think twice about how they get their water. Instead, they worry about the quality of it. First world countries have dozens of options to ensure they get the kind of water they want. For some people in Canada though, this is not the case. Their worry is not how their water tastes, but whether it will be safe.

## **Clean water on reservations**

Clean drinking water on indigenous reservations has been a crisis in Canada since 1995, when the Neskantaga First Nation was put under a long-term drinking advisory (LT-DWA) after their water treatment plant failed. The LT-DWA at Neskantaga was just the start though. In the coming months and years, dozens of Indigenous communities were placed under LT-DWA's. These advisories led to an investigation by multiple Canadian news outlets, including the country's public broadcaster, the CBC. The CBC found that between the years 2004-2014, about

two thirds of indigenous reservations had drinking water advisories. With over 3,000 reservations in Canada, this meant that hundreds of thousands of people did not have access to clean water.

### **The role of government**

The government of Canada has been creating initiatives to help eliminate this crisis since 2008. In that span they have managed to get hundreds of communities access to water, but not enough. When Justin Trudeau was elected as Prime Minister of Canada in 2015, one of his campaign promises was to get every single indigenous community access to clean drinking water by March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023. On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023, the Canadian government failed at that promise.

In 2017, the Canadian government claimed that it would cost at least \$3.2 billion in investments to solve the drinking water crisis. In the time since, both independent research firms and the government have found that the real price will cost much more, mostly through maintenance costs.

In the time since March 2023, the Canadian government created the “First Nations Drinking Water Settlement” which allocated almost \$2 billion to individuals effected by the water crisis. The settlement also promised an additional \$6 billion to support the planning, construction, and maintenance of water and wastewater infrastructure in indigenous communities.

### **Still no clean water**

There are currently 26 indigenous reservations in Canada without access to clean drinking water through their pipes. These reservations all have long-term drinking water advisories (LT-DWAs), meaning that all water coming from the taps must be boiled before consumption. Additionally, more than 90% of those reservations are within 50 Kilometers (or just over 30 miles) from a non-indigenous community that does not have a LT-DWA.

Right now there are tens of thousands of people in Canada without access to clean drinking water from their taps or wells. Spread across almost thirty communities, these people struggle for something most others in the country don't even think about.

It still remains to be seen whether the Canadian government will be able to ensure that this water crisis ends in 2024. With Federal elections coming in 2025, some communities remain hopeful, others less so.