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STUDENTS ADVOCATE FOR SUSTAINABLE ACCESS TO CLEAN DRINKING WATER FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

EDMONTON – Today, Student Advocates for Public Health (SAPH) hosted an online forum calling for the provision of sustainable access to clean drinking water for Indigenous communities across Canada.

“Standing in solidarity today, we, like 97% of Canadians across this country, believe clean drinking water should be recognized as a fundamental human right.” Student Advocates for Public Health member Alexa Thompson says. “We believe the time for empty promises, failed action plans, and finger pointing has passed.”

The United Nations has recognized access to water as a fundamental human right, and while Canada has agreed with this statement, water has not been formally recognized as a Canadian human right. SAPH is calling on the federal government to recognize water as a fundamental human right and to work in partnership with provincial, municipal governments and Indigenous nations to take joint action on sustainable clean drinking water solutions.

Canada has access to over 20% of the world’s freshwater supply. However, colonial-era laws restrict water access, outdated policies limit funding, and a lack of intergovernmental partnerships restrict sustainable water infrastructure solutions. There are currently 36 long term drinking water advisories and 23 short term drinking water advisories across Canada, with 43% of First Nation drinking water systems being labeled as medium to high risk of contamination. At this time, two communities in Alberta are experiencing short term drinking water advisories.

Research has documented that contaminated water leads to a number of waterborne illnesses, infections, and even premature death. Lack of clean drinking water also extends past physical and psychological well-being and has cultural impacts on Indigenous communities. In many Indigenous cultures, water has been described as animate, sacred and a gift from Mother Earth. Therefore, lack of access to clean drinking water can also contribute to a deterioration in the cultural and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous communities.

“I still have to remind my children to limit their water use for bath or showers. I still spend hundreds of dollars a week on bottled water and trips to the laundry mat. Especially when the price of groceries has gotten more expensive, every bottle of water I buy means less food to put on the table.” Says Kylie Meguinis, a proud member of Tsuut’ina Nation who has lived with the challenges of water inequity most of her life. “It’s hard, and It’s not fair. Especially when my neighbours in Calgary less than 5 kilometres away and have full access to clean drinking water and never have to worry about running out or telling their children to be mindful of their water usage. How is it that we can build pipelines thousands of kilometers across the country for oil, but not 1 kilometer for water?”

Maintaining safe water supply on reserves currently falls under the purview of the federal government through Indigenous Service Canada. Despite legislative changes made to address barriers to clean drinking water and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's pledge to end all long-term water advisories by March 2021, water injustices remain ongoing in many Indigenous communities. As of 2019, out of 87 of the long-term water advisories claimed to be fixed, 33 of them were put on the short-term water advisory list. This speaks to how unsustainable the current water solutions are in the federal government's current approach.

“We still have a long way to go in addressing reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, recognizing Indigenous rights and the connection to lands and waters, and the recognition of Indigenous peoples as the rightful stewards of the lands.” Says Kerry Black an assistant professor of engineering at the University of Calgary, and a Tier 2 Canada Research Chair in Integrated Knowledge, Engineering and Sustainable communities. “Addressing the water challenges requires changing the current landscape of decision making around water and infrastructure.”

In December 2021, the federal government settled a class action lawsuit with Indigenous communities across Canada. In the terms of the settlement agreement, the federal government has agreed to repeal and replace the 2013 Safe Drinking Water for First Nations Act. As the federal government begins rewriting this legislation, SAPH hopes its voice, along with the voices of all communities across Canada that are currently without clean sustainable drinking water, will be reflected in the legislation. SAPH encourages the public to make their voice heard too.

Student Advocates for Public Health is a team of graduate students at the University of Alberta who advocate for initiatives to promote public health. We believe that in order to address the Indigenous water inequity, there needs to be collaboration and a unified front across all levels of government. As Canadians we have a moral obligation to ensure that Indigenous communities are not subjected to another 45 years of failed attempts to provide clean sustainable drinking water. The time is now, no more excuses.

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