

Submitted on behalf of the Ontario Nurses for the Environment Interest Group
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Authors and ONEIG declare no conflict of interest

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RNAO Proposed Resolution: Access to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation

Whereas the United Nations Human Rights Council has recognized that access to safe water and sanitation are human rights, and that these are directly tied to human health outcomes;

Whereas gaps in regulations leave many rural Ontarians without water protection and over a dozen communities in Ontario without access to safe drinking water, many of which are Indigenous communities;

Whereas privatization of municipal water and sanitation services turns water into a commodity to be sold for profit and reduces quality, transparency, and accountability while increasing health, social, and financial costs to citizens;

Therefore, be it resolved that

RNAO will work with partners such as the Council of Canadians, David Suzuki Foundation, and the Ontario Public Health Association to lobby the Ontario government to secure ongoing public funding for water infrastructure and enhanced protections against pollution and over-extraction for the ongoing sustainable provision of safe drinking water and sanitation for every resident in Ontario.

Background

Nurses have a critical role in promoting the health of the environment. The Canadian Nurses Association asserts that protecting and promoting environmental health is within the ethical and practice mandate of nurses.¹ Access to clean water and sanitation is connected to well-defined health outcomes, including infectious disease and exposure to toxic contaminants such as lead and mercury.² Moreover, access to water and sanitation is an equity issue in Canada with gaps largely affecting rural, Indigenous and marginalized Ontarians.^{1,3-4}

The United Nations General Assembly recognized the right to safe drinking water and sanitation explicitly after enshrining this right in binding international law alongside the Human Rights Council in 2010.³⁻⁴ While the Canadian government has endorsed this right, it has yet to be enshrined in legislation.⁴ More than twenty long-term drinking water advisories are currently in place in Ontario and most have been in place for over a decade.⁵ Drinking water is protected in Ontario by municipal water quality standards that protect water systems, however, rural Ontarians that utilize private wells are not protected² and are at risk of contamination and loss from industrial activity. Climate change places additional pressures on water systems due to extreme weather, such as flooding and droughts, that could further place the rights to safe water and sanitation at risk.⁶

Water protection is an urgent issue in Ontario and is threatened by pollution, privatization, and over-extraction.² Bottled water companies extract water at rates of 25 billion litres per day at a much lower cost than paid by Ontario residents,⁷ and a moratorium on new and expanding groundwater extraction is set to expire in 2020.⁸ Furthermore, industries are currently able to outbid municipalities for access to water resources.⁷ Water safety and sanitation systems are at risk from poor infrastructure and industrial activity.⁹ The impacts of industrial pollution can last for generations; arsenic pollution in Cobalt and mercury in Grassy Narrows are tragic examples of the persistent legacy of lapses in water protections with devastating health implications.¹⁰ In December 2019, Royal Assent was given to Ontario Bill 132 that cut pollution fines and removed municipal groundwater protections from aggregate mining.¹¹ Water protection is a pressing issue today and nurses in Ontario must use the precautionary principle to ensure stringent regulations are in place to protect water today and in the future.¹ Water is a public good that must remain so under the protection of governments at all levels; nurses, as voices for health, are well-positioned to lobby and ensure that safety, access, conservation, and sustainability are governments' top priorities.

¹ Canadian Nurses Association. (2017). Nurses and environmental health. Retrieved from: <https://www.cna-aiic.ca/~media/cna/page-content/pdf-en/nurses-and-environmental-health-position-statement.pdf>

² The Government of Ontario. (2019). Drinking water. Retrieved from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/drinking-water>

³ United Nations Water. (n.d.) Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. Retrieved from: <https://www.unwater.org/water-facts/human-rights/>

⁴ The Council of Canadians. (2016). Blue communities project guide. Retrieved from: <https://canadians.org/sites/default/files/publications/BCPGuide-2016-web.pdf>

⁵ The Government of Canada. (2019). Ending long-term water advisories. Retrieved from: <https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1506514143353/1533317130660>

⁶ IPCC. (2018). Summary for policymakers. In: Global Warming of 1.5°C. Retrieved from: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/SR15_SPM_version_report_LR.pdf

⁷ Bruce, K., Chemeris, A, Kapitan, K., & Sirrs, L. (2017). Bottled water and groundwater in Ontario. *SURG*, 9(2). Retrieved from: <https://journal.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/surg/article/view/3945/4208>;

⁸ Government of Ontario. (2019) Water bottling rules and moratorium in Ontario. Retrieved from: <https://www.ontario.ca/page/water-bottling-rules-moratorium-ontario>

⁹ David Suzuki Foundation. (2018). Reconciling promises and reality: clean drinking water for First Nations. Retrieved from: <https://davidssuzuki.org/science-learning-centre-article/reconciling-promises-and-reality-clean-drinking-water-for-first-nations/>

¹⁰ Sprague, D.D. & Vermaire, J.C. *Water Air Soil Pollut* (2018) 229: 87. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11270-018-3741-1>; Wong, H C G. Mercury poisoning in the Grassy Narrows First Nation. *CMAJ*, 189(22): E784. doi:10.1503/cmaj.733011

¹¹ Canadian Environmental Law Association. (2019, Nov 29). Bill 132 submission from the Canadian Environmental Law Association. Retrieved from: <https://cela.ca/submissions-on-bill-132/>