

Spallumcheen not alone

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It is easy to take for granted that when you turn on the tap clean running water will flow. Yet, for many British Columbians, access to clean water for drinking, recreating, and fishing is not guaranteed. Spallumcheen residents, who have been living with a drinking water advisory since March 2014, are all too familiar with this reality.

Pollution in the Hullcar aquifer, which supplies drinking water to about 150 residents, has been the subject of recent national attention. For over two years, its nitrate levels have exceeded the maximum allowed under the Canadian Drinking Water Guidelines. This past spring, three hydrologists penned an open letter to the provincial government urging action to alleviate the contamination and address this public health concern.

The Hullcar aquifer contamination has been linked to agricultural operations in the watershed. In May 2016, the Ministry of Environment issued several pollution abatement orders to farms to address the storage and spreading of agricultural waste, but drinking water quality still remains an outstanding concern.

Dishearteningly, the story of Spallumcheen's polluted water supply is only one example of escalating water quality concerns across the province: There is a much bigger, collective water problem in B.C.

Watersheds in B.C. are vulnerable to water quality issues for a number of reasons. Part of the problem is that, with the exception of those fully protected watersheds that supply drinking water to Metro Vancouver and Greater Victoria, many drinking water sources in the province are at risk from resource extraction activities, land use changes, and recreational activities.

From the Elk River Valley, to Mt. Polley, to the Gulf Islands, recent media headlines reveal dozens of stories of water pollution and the ensuing tensions between residents, industry, and government. Accounts of algae blooms in lakes, degraded groundwater quality from saltwater intrusion, toxic mine tailings pond spills, and contaminated drinking water sources are becoming increasingly common.

Closer examination of these examples shows not only the prevalence of water quality issues across the province, but also the inconsistent enforcement or regulation of the activities driving these problems (like agricultural practices and mining). Further, a lack of transparency around the cause and severity of water quality issues fuels public mistrust and conflict. In 2016 in particular, the controversies around the contamination of the Hullcar aquifer, as well as a toxic soil dump in Shawnigan Lake on Vancouver Island, have received media attention at a national level.

So, the undeniable evidence is in: B.C. has complex water problems that require immediate, innovative, and watershed-specific responses.

Fortunately, we do have many opportunities and momentum to do things better. One important part of the solution will be the full implementation of the province's new Water Sustainability Act through the development of robust supporting regulations. This legislation includes improved tools for watershed planning, addressing water issues in land use decisions, and protecting water flows for nature — which, if fully implemented, will provide B.C. with more robust freshwater protections.

First Nations are also leading the way on water governance and stewardship in their territories — from articulating indigenous water laws, to undertaking monitoring and stewardship activities. As well, a sophisticated network of freshwater groups and water funders are also taking action to protect local waters.

B.C.'s biggest challenge will be moving beyond managing water alone toward managing water as part of larger systems. Adopting and integrating a whole watershed perspective into institutions and decision-making is vital if we, as a society, want to move beyond crisis response. What we really need is nothing short of a renewed water ethic, based on conservation, stewardship, and valuing water as the lifeblood of our communities and ecosystems.

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