

B.C.'s Hullcar review proposes water protection measures



November 30, 2017

By Ground Water Canada

Nov. 30, 2017, Victoria – An independent review has recommended a series of improvements to the way British Columbia oversees agricultural waste management in order to protect drinking water in the Hullcar Valley.

Since 2014, the area has been under a water-quality advisory because of elevated nitrate levels, which can be harmful to human health, the B.C. Ministry of Environment in a news release. The province has ordered a review of the Hullcar Valley aquifer situation in summer 2017, led by Oliver Brandes, co-director of the POLIS project on ecological governance at the University of Victoria's Centre for Global Studies.

The final report lists nine sets of recommendations with the goals of improving the soil nitrate balance and restoring the aquifer to acceptable nitrate levels in the Hullcar Valley; and regulatory mechanisms to help prevent a similar situation from occurring in other drinking water aquifers in British Columbia.

“Our government's goal is to ensure agricultural practices are consistent with the provision and protection of clean, safe drinking water,” said George Heyman, Minister of Environment and Climate Change Strategy. “The report shows the way forward with a set of clear, thoughtful actions based on the best available information. The government is listening and we have already begun to implement the report's recommendations.”

The report's recommendations encompass a mix of activities, including area-based and water sustainability plans; independently verified monitoring and reporting of aquifer and soil nutrient status; incentives for beneficial management practices and innovative technology; and governance and regulatory updates.

The report also recommends, as a long-term reform, reviewing sustainable governance structures for water utilities in the area in partnership with the Splitsin people and the Township of Spallumcheen.

“Splitsin acknowledges Minister Heyman's commitment to the protection of safe drinking water,” said Kukpi7 Wayne Christian of Splitsin. “The report outlines a number of recommendations that will lay the groundwork for a robust government-to-government process that will create solutions to the ongoing contamination of the Hullcar Valley aquifers. Splitsin looks forward to the implementation of the recommendations.”

“We are very interested in responding to the report and in having the opportunity to suggest amendments to regulations,” said Brian Upper of Steele Springs Waterworks District. “We are hopeful that this process will lead the government to help remediate the nitrate-contaminated aquifer and to finally proactively protect all of B.C.'s surface and groundwater for future generations.”

The government today also released an intentions paper for amending the agricultural waste control regulation (AWCR). The amended regulation will address some of the most pressing concerns outlined in the Hullcar report that are specific to regulatory improvements. In addition, the ministry's existing tools under the Environmental Management Act, such as orders, will continue to address the immediate concerns. The other recommendations will be addressed in coming months.

“Clean water is critical for farmers and ranchers to provide healthy food for British Columbians,” said BC Agricultural Council (BCAC) board chair Stan Vander Waal. “As stewards of the land, they also want to make sure water sources are protected. Government and farmers have already dedicated a great deal of effort into updating regulations to manage agriculture byproducts to protect the environment and BCAC looks forward to reviewing this latest report and additional recommendations.”

Approximately 250 residents depend on the Hullcar Valley aquifer for their drinking water.



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