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**OPINION**

## Sonia Furstenu: Lead worries in water should be a wake-up call for

# Water should be a wake-up call for us all

By **Sonia Furstenuau** Special to Star Vancouver

Fri., Nov. 22, 2019 | 3 min. read

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British Columbians and Canadians across the country are reeling from recent revelations by investigative news reports that have uncovered lead levels in some city water that surpassed those in infamous Flint, Michigan.

I can relate to their horror all too well.

They are experiencing the same shock and anger I felt in March 2013, when the B.C. Ministry of Environment issued a draft permit for a landfill in Shawnigan Lake's watershed, the source for drinking water for my family and for 12,000 others in my community.

ARTICLE CONTINUES BELOW

I, like others, had taken for granted that government prioritized the protection and delivery of drinking water, and that I could count on the agencies tasked with delivering that water to ensure that what I was drinking posed no risk to me or my family.

No more.

I pledged to challenge and change this system. This is what motivated me to enter politics, first at the local level, then provincially. I wanted to protect my community's drinking water, but I also wanted to work to ensure that watershed and drinking water protection rose to the top of the provincial government's mandate. Indeed, access to clean, potable water must be a top priority of every level of government.

As we are seeing in the recent investigative reports by Global and the Toronto Star and their partners, drinking water all across Canada is at risk. Levels of lead contamination have been found to exceed drinking water quality guidelines in cities and towns across the country.

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The focus of these reports has been on lead levels in tap water, largely due to aging water infrastructure that includes lead pipes and lead soldering, and the solutions are not simple or straightforward. Toronto has added orthophosphate to the water supply as phosphoric acid, with positive results, significantly reducing the acidity of the water and its absorption rate of lead and other metals. Upgrading of municipal infrastructure and replacement of pipes in households will also need to be part of the solution, and updating policies and regulations at all levels of government will be necessary. Citizens should have confidence in the transparency and accountability of their water purveyors, whether it's a large municipal system or a small rural one.

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There are other considerations that we need to recognize. The water coming into our drinking water systems is also at risk, even before it reaches the pipes that carry it to our homes. The sources of our drinking water, whether surface water or underground aquifers are impacted by activities in our watersheds. Forestry, mining, agriculture, dumping, development and fracking all negatively impact water sources, and we need to be far more serious about applying a water-protection lens to decision-making at all levels of government.

Solving this challenge — from protecting source water to ensuring lead is not carried into our homes — is not an insignificant task. But that can in no way be an excuse for not doing it.

In B.C., a proposal for how to begin the work of protecting source water has been presented to government. The B.C. Freshwater Legacy Initiative, the POLIS Water Sustainability Project, the First Nations Fisheries Council, and the B.C. Wildlife Federation have created a joint initiative, calling for the creation of a dedicated Watershed Security Fund so that we can have the resources, provincewide, to ensure the long-term protection and resilience of our watersheds. This fund would support the necessary work in our communities where partnerships between local governments, First Nations, farmers, businesses and community groups could be the engines for planning and implementing the solutions we need to see for our watersheds.

The Cowichan Watershed Board is an example of this model and has been instrumental in raising awareness about our region's watershed, and in moving us forward on attaining a new weir for Cowichan Lake. But we need to take this further. Co-governance of community watersheds, with a science-driven approach to protecting our drinking water sources is not a lofty goal, it's an urgent necessity as we experience ever-increasing impacts of climate change in our already beleaguered watersheds.

This latest development is one in a long line of wake-up calls about the precarious state of our drinking water. Let's stop hitting the snooze button and get to work.

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*Sonia Furstenuau is the Green MLA for Cowichan Valley*

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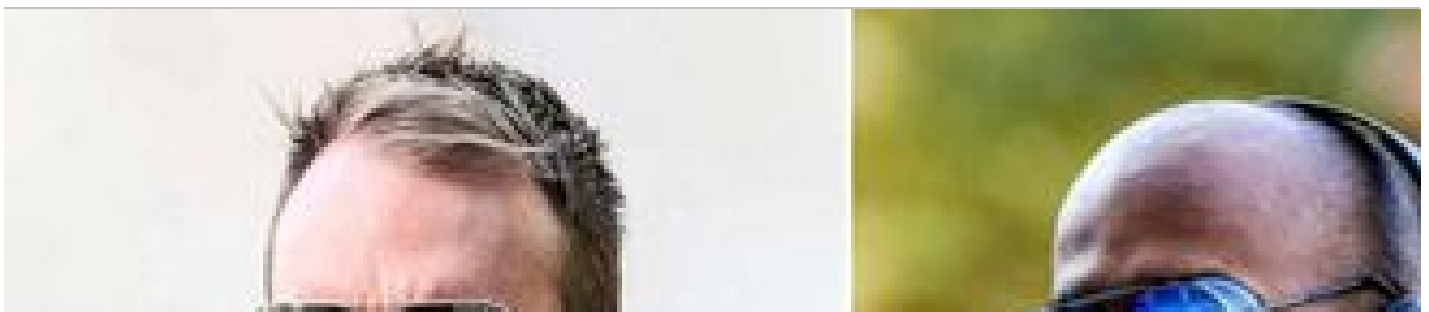




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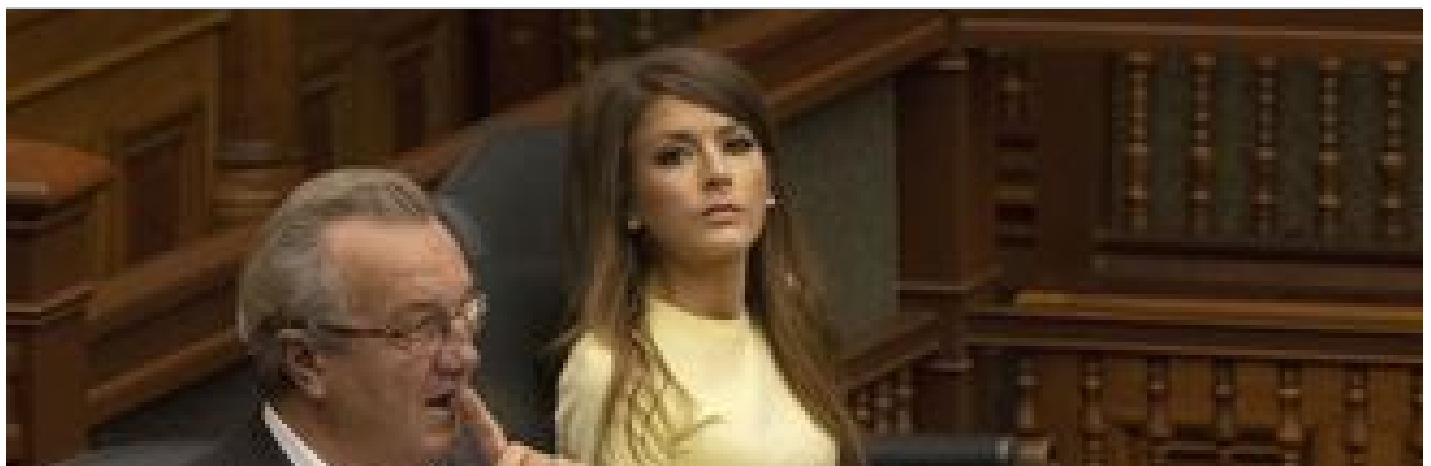
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**Corrections for Dec. 9**



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