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COMMENTARY: A problem solved by First Nations, for First Nations

Contributed | Posted: 18 hours ago | Updated: 18 hours ago | 5 Min Read



The Atlantic First Nations Water Authority (AFNWA), a not-for-profit water utility will provide clean drinking water and safe wastewater services to its communities.

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Adam Gould, BA, BPR, MAIC, who is communications and outreach manager for AFNWA based in Millbrook, N.S., submitted the following opinion article.

It should surprise you that in 2022, there are communities in Canada under permanent drinking water advisory. It's truly incomprehensible to grasp what an enormous entitlement it is to turn a tap for a drink of water, to cook food, or to rinse your hands, when for many Indigenous communities, it is a privilege they have never been afforded.

Water is a necessity of life and fundamental right to all living beings. It is something for which we all agree; so why are some Indigenous communities throughout Canada still without?

Sadly, this isn't new. In 2015, Justin Trudeau vowed to eliminate all drinking water advisories in First Nations communities within five years of forming government, acknowledging the disparity and urgency to act. Two weeks later, he was elected prime minister of Canada with a majority government.

Fast forward to 2022, dozens of First Nations communities remain waiting for this basic, fundamental right: the necessary access to safe, clean drinking water.

This isn't a problem without a solution.

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Enter the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority (AFNWA), a not-for-profit water utility that is owned and operated by First Nations, for First Nations. The first of its kind in Canada, AFNWA will provide clean drinking water and safe wastewater services to its owners – the communities, along with assuming all operations, maintenance and upgrade of all water and wastewater assets. With its goal of being ready for full operations in spring 2022, AFNWA is positioned to meet this milestone.

Regarding a sustainable approach, AFNWA developed a 10-year business plan based on first principles, and clearly recognizing that water and wastewater services in First Nations communities are underfunded. The utility has developed a plan to close this deficiency such that First Nations communities can receive

the same level of service that settler communities enjoy. AFNWA then submitted its funding request as part of the 2022-23 federal budget and all eyes are on Ottawa to live up to its fiduciary responsibility. AFNWA is ready to blaze a trail for others to follow.

Though it has been in transition for two years, the idea of a water and wastewater utility that is owned, operated, and managed by First Nations was conceptualized over 20 years ago. The Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik chiefs of Atlantic Canada worked with government representatives and industry experts to determine solutions to the drinking water issues that plagued communities for generations. AFNWA began trailblazing in 2020 with the first phases of its transition implementation plan, with ground-breaking work coming soon to communities.

AFNWA has gained support in its short history through the dedicated outreach of its senior management team to the board of directors, and especially to the communities it will proudly serve. Seventeen communities had participated in the utility's asset management plan [AMP] which included the development of long-term capital budgets for a sustainable approach to service delivery. With an 18th community expressing interest in membership, AFNWA can provide service to over half of the First Nations communities in all four Atlantic Canada provinces. Other communities are always encouraged to join as chief executive officer, Carl Yates, says, "the door is always open!"







AFNWA CEO Carl Yates - Contributed

Atlantic Canada's non-Indigenous community is supportive of an Indigenous-owned water and wastewater utility. In a recent poll of 1,450 Atlantic Canadians, 85 per cent feel that First Nations should have an independently owned and operated utility, up from the 2018 poll. When asked if AFNWA should receive ongoing funding from the federal government, 79 per cent said 'yes.' About 95 per cent of the respondents identified as non-Indigenous, stating that 'mainstream society' also believes in the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority.

AFNWA will change the system that is imposed for over 150 years, strengthening sovereignty to Mi'kma'ki and Wolastoqkuk communities. For the first time in Canada, Indigenous peoples will operate and manage the service delivery for water and wastewater, key elements for self-determination.

We will finally have access to this basic, fundamental right.

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