

## AFN Virtual Water Summit

27 October 2021

11:00 – 15:00 EDT

### Executive Summary

Registered participants included: 15 Chiefs, 24 corporate, 91 First Nations delegates, 54 government officials, 167 other/non-governmental organization, 17 staff

Moderator Dr. Kerry Black welcomed participants and invited Knowledge Keeper Roberta Oshkabewisens and Water Keeper Sally Gaikezheyongai to open the Summit.

Elder Oshkabewisens offered a prayer and Water Keeper Sally Gaikezheyongai sang the water song.

### **Message from AFN National Chief Roseanne Archibald**

National Chief RoseAnne Archibald welcomed participants and acknowledged Regional Chiefs Cindy Woodhouse (MB), Glen Hare (ON) and Kluane Adamek (YT) for their hard work and advocacy on such an important issue. She also welcomed participation from the federal government. Clean, safe water is one of the greatest needs for First Nations in Canada and must be made a priority.

### **Summit Opening Remarks**

Regional Chief (MB) Cindy Woodhouse noted that the lack of safe water and housing for First Nations are crisis issues across the Canada. Emergency planning is inadequate or non-existent. This summit is an opportunity address these issues and to hear from the federal government, advocates and activists. Special emphasis will be placed on First Nations-led solutions, which the AFN will support.

Regional Chief (ON) Glen Hare focused on industrial pollution of the waters, giving the example of gasoline in the water lines in Iqaluit and burning containers causing contamination of the seas near Vancouver Island. He also expressed concern with the state of the water sources in First Nations communities creating numerous health problems. He reminded the federal government that it had committed to closing the infrastructure gap by 2030 and to do that, work had to start immediately, reducing red tape and prioritizing investments.

Regional Chief (YT) Kluane Aage Adamek spoke of her community's concern over the state of Kluane Lake, one of the largest lakes in her territory. The lake was fed by glacial meltwater which drained into the Slims River and thence to the lake. Sudden climate change caused the glacier to retreat, the river's flow was reduced to a trickle and most concerning of all, changed course and no longer fed the lake at all. Water levels in the lake have dropped by ten feet and the fish and wildlife populations have dropped or disappeared.

Chad Westmacott, Director General, Community Infrastructure (Indigenous Services Canada) assured attendees that Indigenous Services Canada (ISC) is actively working with First Nations to ensure access to safe, clean water. As of 25 October 2021, 119 water advisories have been lifted, the latest being in Shoal Lake 40 – after 24 years. 197 short-term advisories have been prevented from becoming long-term, while 43 long-term advisories in 31 communities remain. He gave several examples of successful or ongoing initiatives including a review of the O&M funding policy, capacity-building initiatives such as the Réseau “Hackathon”, virtual distance learning programs for water operators and in partnership with the Ontario First Nations Technical Services Corporation (OFNTSC) promotes water operator careers through its Technical Career Youth Outreach Program. There is also a project, partnered with NWAC, looking at barriers faced by women two-spirited and gender-diverse peoples who wish a career in water and wastewater operations. He noted the success of the Water First and Bimose Tribal Council’s Water Internship program, which recently graduated 11 new operators. ISC is also working with the Atlantic First Nations Water Authority, which is finalizing the creation of a First Nations-led water utility for 15 First Nations communities in the Atlantic region.

There was a brief Q&A session following the opening remarks.

### **Clarissa Brocklehurst, Water Supply and Sanitation Specialist**

Ms Brocklehurst’s work in international development is focused on the United Nations’ goals of the right to safe water and sanitation and sustainable development. The right to clean water and sanitation was explicitly recognized by the UN and other international organizations in 2010. She noted that it is important to remember the concept of progressive realization – understanding that countries cannot achieve the fulfillment of the right to water overnight. Her presentation covered a number of areas, two of the most important being a) the expectation that wealthy countries with resources are expected to help poorer countries and b) achieving sustainable development goals of universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water and access to adequate and sustainable sanitation and hygiene.

Ms Brocklehurst noted how the pandemic has emphasized the importance of hygiene. Ease of access to water promotes better hygiene and sanitation, which in turn promotes improved health outcomes. Water is relevant to every country in the world; but there isn’t a high-income country that does not have a pocket of unserved people. In Canada, it’s the Indigenous population. Canada can report high levels of water supply and sanitation through aggregate numbers, which hide the fact that there is a percentage of the population that remains unserved. Better data is needed and Canada needs to be held accountable.

She noted that women are first to suffer when water supply is inadequate; poor sanitation affects women more. Better gender balance in management of water utilities creates better outcomes.

### **Monica Lewis-Patrick, We the People of Detroit**

Ms Lewis-Patrick gave an account of the events which led to a potable water supply crisis in the City of Detroit, Michigan. State policy is that if a home is without running water for 72 hours, parents are in danger of losing custody of their children. In Detroit, if a household is 30 days

behind in payment of a water bill or owing \$150.00 on that bill, water is shut off. The majority of water shutoffs occurred in poorer neighbourhoods and the majority of the poorer households were Black. When the city went into bankruptcy, emergency management seized and privatized public assets, including the water authority. Reconfiguration of the governance structure of this authority put it into private hands that saw water as a source of profit rather than a human right. Water shutoffs impact public health and the city is seeing an uptick in water-borne disease. These diseases are often underreported as emergency management also allowed privatization of Health and Human Services. Research on hospital data for 37,000 patients was correlated with water shutoff data and showed a 150% probability of increased public health outbreaks, especially in communities of low income and communities of colour. A task force of public health experts, attorneys and water experts recommended an income-based billing system, which was rejected.

During a short question and answer session, Ms Lewis-Patrick pointed out the inequity in the treatment afforded debtors – large corporations, owners of civic amenities such as golf courses and arenas – who were able to renegotiate or write off debts to the water authority while low-income households had their water shut off.

### **Chief Emily Whetung (Curve Lake First Nation)**

Chief Whetung described how, in her grandfather's lifetime, the water in Curve Lake could be consumed straight from the lake. In the present day, her family had to pay \$12,000 to have a water treatment system installed in order to safely drink water from their own well. This water is still so hard that appliances have to be replaced more often and the high iron concentration stains toilets, sinks and laundry. First Nations have to stop accepting this situation and find solutions by working to have Indigenous rights recognized, recreate relations with governments and with those with whom they share Turtle Island. Curve Lake has developed a qualitative model which it uses in relationship building across all sectors, projects and relationships managed by the community.

Briefly, the steps are:

- Information sharing – getting to know one another;
- Regular and constructive dialogue – expressing problems, sharing goals and charting a mutually-beneficial path forward;
- Trust building – a slow process that is ongoing and reciprocal. Trust is needed to build between our communities and our nations. Do what you can to mutually help each other;
- Meaningful consultation – share ideas, gain feedback in order to move from a concept to a fully-formed project that meets the goals and needs of all parties;
- The final stage is balance – the relationship must be beneficial to all our relations – human, animal, the grasses and stones, and the water. Resources must be allocated equally.

Curve Lake has long advocated for sustainable water resources and a class action suit filed together with Neskantaga and Tataskweyak was recently settled in favour of the plaintiffs.

A question and answer session followed.

**Judy da Silva, Grassy Narrows First Nation**

Ms da Silva gave the background of the events which led to the tragedy of mercury poisoning in the First Nations community of Grassy Narrows. Ten tons of mercury industrial waste was dumped into the Wabigoon River, poisoning the fish and ultimately the people who ate the fish. Much to Grassy Narrows' concern, application has been made for a gold mine in the territory. This gold mine would have a tailings pond as big as the one at Mt. Polley (BC), which recently breached, causing irreparable environmental damage. Another concern is a proposal to build a nuclear waste storage facility near Ignace, where nuclear waste would be buried one mile deep into the Pre-Cambrian Shield. There is water there. Industry has a greater say in how the earth is used than the human beings; there is "environmental racism" where First Nations communities in resource-rich areas are often the first impacted by the pollution cause by resource extraction.

On a more positive side, work is starting on a \$20 million care facility for those Grassy Narrows citizens who suffer the effects of the mercury poisoning. Ms da Silva urged those in mainstream society to help amplify First Nations voices and stop the misuse of the earth and the water.

A question and answer session followed.

**Dr. Jane Philpott, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences and Chief Executive Officer, Southeastern Ontario Academic Medical Organization (SEAMO), Queen's University**

Dr. Philpott spoke of her experience as Minister of Indigenous Services between 2015 and 2019. At the time of her appointment, there were about 100 long-term advisories in effect. The federal government had made a commitment to eliminate long-term drinking water advisories by March 2021. In order to do this, where and what the advisories were had to be determined, which took an enormous amount of research and documentation. By 2018, 38 advisories had been lifted. When the target date of March 2021 arrived, long-term advisories still remained. The Auditor General's report stated that the federal government had not provided adequate support for First Nations to access safe drinking water and the latest ISC web posting shows 44 long-term advisories still in effect. The Auditor General's report cited blocks to success, including O&M funding formulae, salary gap, and chronic underfunding. Some funding formulae had not been updated in 30 years. All of this should be updated and amended. The cost is not insignificant but should not be a reason to leave this situation unresolved. The root of the problem is not technological; it is the denial of basic human rights, inherent rights, constitutional and treaty rights. There needs to be thorough deconstruction of the colonial legacy, dismantling of the Indian Act and recognition, implementation and exercise of First Nations' rights to self-government and a nation-to-nation relationship with the federal government.

Dr. Philpott urged participants not to underestimate the impact they can have; most Canadians want to be allies in the cause of justice. She also urged engaging academics in the cause, there are hundreds of researchers who could propose solutions.

A question and answer session followed.

## **Winona LaDuke, International Speaker/Writer**

Ms LaDuke told of her nation's 7-year fight to stop the construction of the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline through their lands in Minnesota. The White Earth, Red Lake and Mille Lacs Bands have filed suit in both federal and tribal courts in an attempt to halt the destruction of the environment and violation of First Nations rights. There are claims that Enbridge has influenced tribal elections in order to gain approvals and consent from leadership. The State of Michigan has withdrawn Enbridge's permit and ordered that it shut down the pipeline running under the Straits of Mackinac. This has not been done. This is a violation of international law, as well as state and federal court orders.

A question and answer session followed.

At the conclusion of the Summit, Dr. Black thanked all the speakers and announced Lisa McLeod as the winner of an iPad. She reminded participants of the upcoming water symposium being held 15-17 February 2022. The focus on women as water stewards and protectors. She also highlighted some of the important messages heard, including:

- Connection of water to Indigenous ways of doing, knowing and being as well as the importance of water in cultural, spiritual and our physical and emotional health;
- Regional Chiefs concerns on housing, infrastructure and environment;
- Important international initiatives and how they might champion initiatives in Canada; and,
- Continuing issues being faced in addressing clean and safe drinking water and the importance of rights recognition and the role of First Nations in leadership.

## On-line Resources Cited

**Reseau “Hackathon”:** <https://www.reseaucmi.org>

**Monica Lewis-Patrick, We the People of Detroit:**

“New Water Barons”: <https://globalresearch.ca/the-new-water-barons-wall-street-mega-banks-are-buying-up-the-worlds-water/5383274>

<https://smartwatermagazine.com/news/we-people-detroit/effects-water-insecurity-physical-and-mental-health-detroit-residents-during>

<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.wlns.com/news/michigan/detroit-water-shutoffs-led-to-more-covid-19-cases/amp/>

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/15/us-structural-racism-shapes-access-water-during-covid-19>

**Judy da Silva, Grassy Narrows First Nation**

[www.freegrassy.net](http://www.freegrassy.net)

**Dr. Jane Philpott, Dean, Faculty of Health Sciences, and Chief Executive Officer,  
Southeastern Ontario Academic Medical Organization (SEAMO), Queen’s University**

Money Won’t Fix Our Health Care: <https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/money-wont-fix-our-health-care/>

**Winona LaDuke, International Speaker/Writer**

[www.honorearth.org](http://www.honorearth.org)

No More Pipeline Blues: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjoRB7ETaGk>