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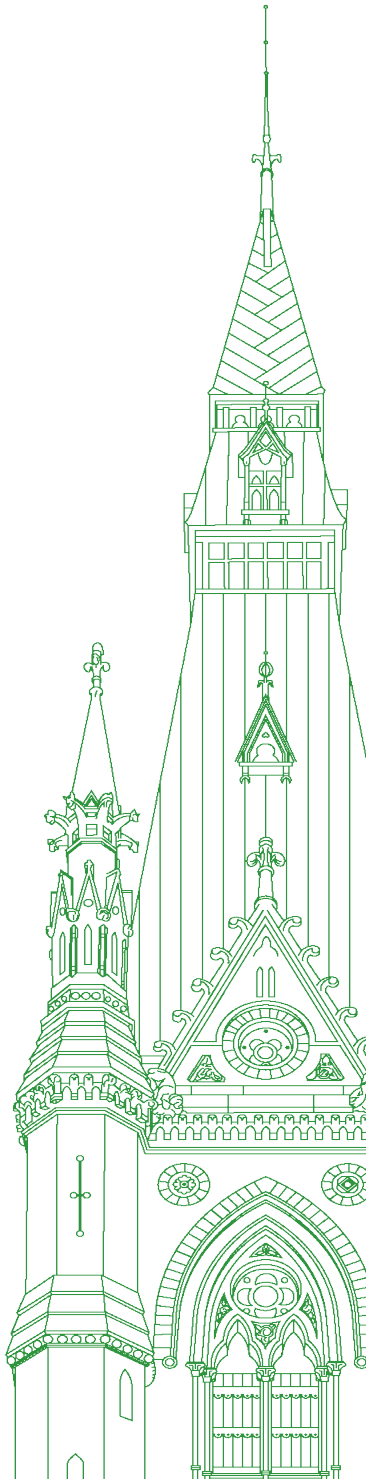

Chair: Mr. Patrick Weiler

Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs

Thursday, September 26, 2024

● (0920)

[*English*]

The Chair (Mr. Patrick Weiler (West Vancouver—Sunshine Coast—Sea to Sky Country, Lib.)): I call this meeting to order. Welcome to meeting number 120 of the House of Commons Standing Committee on Indigenous and Northern Affairs.

As always, I want to acknowledge that we are gathered on the ancestral and unceded territories of the Algonquin Anishinabe peoples and express gratitude that we're able to do the important work of this committee on lands they've stewarded since time immemorial.

We do have a witness who will join us shortly. They are having some technical issues, but I wanted to make sure we got started so we don't waste any more time.

Pursuant to the order of reference of Wednesday, June 5, 2024, the committee is resuming consideration of Bill C-61, an act respecting water, source water, drinking water, wastewater and related infrastructure on first nation lands.

I want to welcome our witnesses who are both here today in person and joining us by video conference.

Welcome, Dr. Joss Reimer, president, Canadian Medical Association.

From the Water Movement, we have Candace Cook, Deon Hassler, Bita Malekian and Desmond Mitchell, all joining by video conference.

Very shortly, we will have Mr. James Hotchkies from the Ontario Society of Professional Engineers.

We'll start off with five minutes for introductory remarks for each of the witnesses.

We'll start with Dr. Reimer. The floor is yours for five minutes, please.

Dr. Joss Reimer (President, Canadian Medical Association): Thank you, Chair.

My name is Dr. Joss Reimer. As president of the Canadian Medical Association, the CMA, I'm grateful for this opportunity to speak about the direct link between water and health.

As a public health physician, I was trained in the topic of water quality and am very familiar with the various factors that can make water unsafe.

[*Translation*]

Canada holds much of the world's fresh water. It is our responsibility to protect this critical resource for future generations. The CMA is committed to working in partnership and reciprocity with indigenous peoples to advance reconciliation in health care.

[*English*]

Indigenous health is intrinsically linked to the health of the land and water. Without protecting remaining clean water sources, we risk environmental damage and loss of life.

Water insecurity is a matter of life and death for many indigenous communities. In addition to the infectious risks of unsafe water, long-term drinking water advisories have been linked to higher suicide rates in first nations communities, exposing the lethal cost of inaction.

“Water is life” is a truth that must guide us to protect indigenous rights and this sacred resource. It's a plea for action. We must protect these communities to ensure that everyone thrives and not just survives.

We look to the government to invest in health priorities identified by indigenous organizations to achieve measurable, ongoing improvements in health and wellness. We must listen to the voices of indigenous communities calling for careful reconsideration of its provision to ensure self-determined maintenance of essential drinking water and waste-water infrastructure.

The CMA supports the amendments raised by chiefs and first nations, specifically acknowledging that access to drinking water as a fundamental human right, and we urge the swift passage of Bill C-61.

Chair, the CMA has long believed that health is a basic human right. Ensuring safe and sufficient drinking water is essential to better health and wellness. We rarely learn about the toxicity of source water in medical school, but those who work in indigenous communities see the impact first-hand. As a public health physician, I myself have issued many temporary boil water advisories in my career. Seeing the disruption that a short-term advisory can have on the daily lives of community members and businesses makes it all the more striking to consider that this is a daily reality for many indigenous communities.

Everyone in Canada, including those who live in remote and indigenous communities, should have the same confidence in the quality of their water supply as those who are living here in Ottawa. It is not lost on me that we are here in this space with clear, clean drinking water in front of us today.

We want families, no matter where they live, to be able to fill their glasses with potable water, free from toxins. Everyone should be able to cook with water that enriches their health and does not endanger it. They should be without fear of exposure to harmful contaminants. Who shouldn't be able to teach their children that water is a source of life and not a potential hazard?

Representing the physicians of Canada, the CMA strives to build sustainable health care systems inclusive of indigenous knowledge. We call on governments to prioritize and invest in policies that address the determinants of health, including the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization, income, education, employment, food security and, indeed, safe water.

Addressing water security and climate resiliency is also key to closing the health disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous communities. Protecting water security goes hand in hand with confronting climate change. It's a crisis that strikes indigenous communities hardest and threatens their way of life. The factors that drive climate change and poor health are closely connected.

Indigenous peoples face a dire lack of health services, particularly in remote communities, and they experience anti-indigenous racism in our health systems. They experience a lack of cultural safety and a disregard for indigenous health and healing models.

In conclusion, Bill C-61 is a step toward ensuring clean water and better health outcomes for all. We support the legislation's commitment to establishing safe water infrastructure in, on and under first nations lands, in co-operation with first nations and in a way that is consistent with Canada's obligations to first nations. Improving health outcomes for indigenous peoples must start with indigenous voices leading the way.

I thank you for your time today.

● (0925)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Dr. Reimer.

We're just going to have a very brief suspension here as we get one of our witnesses connected.

● (0925)

_____(Pause)_____

● (0927)

The Chair: Mr. Hotchkies, we are just in the middle of doing the opening remarks. I'll turn it over to you next.

You have five minutes to deliver opening remarks.

Mr. James Hotchkies (Professional Engineer, Ontario Society of Professional Engineers): Okay. That sounds good.

As articulated in UN sustainable development goal number 6, access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene is the most basic human need for health and well-being.

Now that we're over two decades into the 21st century, it's completely unacceptable for any community in Canada to have inadequate access to safe and affordable drinking water or to safely managed sanitation.

Effective management and ready access to safe water supply and sanitation is essential not only to health but also to poverty reduction, food security, peace and human rights, ecosystems and education, yet today, many first nations communities across Canada have lived under long-term boil water advisories for many decades.

This bill would recognize the first nations' stewardship over their own water resources and infrastructure and improve the potential to develop the most appropriate and effective infrastructure models and solutions for their communities.

While Canada has well-developed infrastructure across the country, the models and solutions that have been successfully deployed in Toronto or Vancouver or even in small towns throughout Alberta or Quebec may not be the best options for first nations communities in northern Manitoba or even those along the St. Lawrence. In fact, as Canada tries to accommodate major population growth in peri-urban or rural communities, the infrastructure models developed in the early part of the 20th century may no longer be the most appropriate solutions. Increasingly around the world, decentralized solutions that reflect the needs and capabilities of local communities are gaining traction.

It's positive to see the responsibility for the management of resources and services being localized to first nations communities. Local influence can enhance the adoption of the most appropriate solutions for that specific community and also accelerate the adoption of better and more advanced technologies and processes. Without question, as we try to embrace sustainability in a circular economy, decentralized solutions that reflect the unique nature of an application or community may offer the most effective options for managing this essential resource.

However, Bill C-61 doesn't come without its complexities. The management of water resources poses significant transboundary issues, both on the quality of water entering the community from an external source and on the effluent that may leave the community and migrate to adjacent sites. A strong consultative framework will be required to navigate through these issues and ensure that the health and safety of all Canadians are of paramount concern.

Many existing water and waste-water regulations, standards, operating practices and treatment processes have been developed over many decades, and often from the perspective of larger centralized utility models. These may not be the most effective or appropriate options for small communities that are often remote.

Solutions for many of these applications will have to recognize potential obstacles, from the lack of readily available expertise or spare parts to power supply issues and the need for location-specific training and maintenance resources. Encouraging the development of solutions that reflect and embrace the needs and interests of smaller localized populations, such as first nations communities, could contribute significantly to the goals of sustainability and circularity.

Thank you.

● (0930)

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hotchkies.

Next up, we will be turning the microphone over to Water Movement. I'm not sure who will be speaking on behalf of the organization, but collectively, you will have five minutes to deliver opening remarks.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell (Utilities Manager, Water Movement): I'll take this one on.

I was hoping for some extra time because one of our colleagues couldn't speak today, so I think I can expand a little further to help the cause, if that's all right.

The Chair: Sure. You have five minutes, and then there will be opportunities for the members of the committee to ask questions in rounds afterwards.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: Good morning, members of the committee. My name is Desmond Mitchell, and I am grateful for the opportunity to speak with you today.

I'm a certified water operator with over 15 years of practical experience in working in and managing water utility systems. I had the privilege of establishing a utilities department for Tsuut'ina Nation, focusing on capacity building and skill development within the community.

Additionally, I collaborate with various organizations, including Water Movement; NIWAC, the National Indigenous Water Advisory Committee; and TSAG, the Technical Services Advisory Group. My work, along with others, has extended to a variety of first nations water initiatives across Canada.

Today I am here to voice my concerns about Bill C-61 from an operational standpoint.

I want to make one thing clear from the start: As someone who worked at many levels of water systems operations, I am deeply concerned about the practical impact this bill will have, particularly for water operators and public works staff. Quite simply, the operational foundation in many first nations communities is not yet ready. The reality is that many first nations communities do not have the technical capacity to manage their water systems in the way that this bill assumes. Throughout Water Movement, we have consistently demonstrated that there is a severe lack of support for water operators in first nations communities. Many operators work in under-resourced environments, often without access to ongoing training, mentorship or tools they need to do their jobs effectively.

Becoming a certified water operator is not something that happens overnight. It requires years of training, experience and support. It also requires a fully functional system in place, a support network that includes public works staff, proper infrastructure and access to professional development. Developing a capable and self-sufficient utility or public works department takes decades, especially when starting from a lower operational baseline.

The biggest concern I have with Bill C-61 is the liability it places on first nations, especially when so many communities are already struggling to retain dedicated and qualified operators. Water systems are complex, and they require not just skilled operators but an entire public works team that is properly trained, well-supported and fully staffed. Without a qualified and stable team in place, this bill is essentially a disaster waiting to happen. When water systems fail, it's the community that suffers, not just in terms of health risks but also in legal and financial consequences. By shifting responsibilities onto first nations without ensuring the proper operational support is already in place, this bill risks creating situations in which first nations are held liable for system failures that they simply don't have the capacity to prevent or manage. I also note that first nations will be liable for systems that have been diminished by lack of funding in previous years.

In its current form, the bill assumes that first nations can meet these new responsibilities, but the reality is that many communities are not equipped to take on the added burden. If there aren't enough certified operators or if the public works teams are stretched too thin, we'll see serious consequences. Infrastructure will fail, water quality could drop, and ultimately it'll be the first nation that faces the fallout—legally, financially and operationally. Simply put, without the proper support for retaining qualified operators and building robust public works teams, this bill is setting many communities up for failure.

Another major concern is that the consultation process for this bill largely overlooked the voices of those who are most affected: the water operators and public works staff who are responsible for the day-to-day management. We are the people who deal directly with the challenges of aging infrastructure, a lack of resources and gaps in operational support. We are the ones who understand what it takes to run water systems, because we do it every day. By not consulting directly with the water operators and public works teams, this bill overlooks the operational reality that many first nations are not prepared to handle.

I believe Bill C-61 needs to be reconsidered, with a focus on the operational foundation of first nations water systems.

● (0935)

This solution cannot be a top-down approach. It needs to start with the people on the ground, such as operators, public works staff and the departments tasked with managing these critical systems.

Before moving forward with strict timelines and standards, we need to focus on capacity building. My recommendations for this include the following—

The Chair: Mr. Mitchell, I'm afraid the time has elapsed.

There will be opportunities for the members to ask questions. I hate to interrupt you here, but we do need to get on to the first round of questioning. You can hold that thought until the questions come up.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: Would you like me to do the conclusion?

The Chair: Wrap it up very quickly, because we're already over time here.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: In closing, I want to emphasize that while Bill C-61 is well intentioned, it overlooks the most critical element of water management, which is the people who operate the systems. Without proper support, training and infrastructure, many first nations simply won't be able to meet the standards set by this bill.

We must address the foundational issues before imposing new regulations and guidelines.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Mitchell.

With that, we're going to start our first round of questioning, which is the six-minute round, starting with Mr. Melillo from the Conservative Party.

Mr. Eric Melillo (Kenora, CPC): Thank you, Mr. Chair. I know your job is a tough one sometimes to keep us on schedule here. Thank you for that.

I want to thank all the witnesses for being here.

Mr. Mitchell, I believe you were about to go into a few recommendations. I'd like to give you the opportunity to share those recommendations with us.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: Certainly. Thank you.

My recommendations for this include the following.

First is investing in operator training and development and ensuring that every first nation has access to qualified and certified operators.

Second is providing ongoing support for retention and professional growth, because operators need not just initial training but also long-term support to remain effective.

Third is focusing on infrastructure improvements and maintenance, as many systems are operating with outdated or failing equipment.

Fourth is engaging frontline workers in the conversation. We are the ones who know what it will take to make these systems run.

● (0940)

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you very much for that. It's very much appreciated.

I wanted to ask you a lot of questions that I think you already touched on in your opening remarks, but maybe I'll just dig into it a little bit more.

Some of the concerns we've heard throughout this process at the committee and in meetings outside is that there is a lot that this bill leaves to future regulation. The teeth and the follow-through are perhaps things that are still to be determined going forward. I think that is the case when it comes to ensuring that there are water operators who are trained and that the systems are built to withstand conditions and all of those things.

You talked a bit about the process to become a trained operator. Could you go a bit further into detail with that? Is there a general timeline that it takes? What are the complexities for that for someone living on a first nation versus outside of a first nation?

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: Oh, man, this is my bread and butter.

There are two main paths you can take to become an operator. I call one the school of hard knocks. That's when you work with a first nation or municipality for a year. After that year, I, as a manager, can get you enrolled in courses and we can start that path to write your certification exam.

It's important to note that there are four different disciplines. They are water treatment, water distribution, wastewater collection and wastewater treatment.

A successful candidate—a real go-getter—can be a certified operator through the path of hard knocks in about a year and a half. I've never seen it done; it's closer to two.

There's another path you can take. I'm in Alberta, so I'm going to use NAIT and SAIT as examples.

You go to school for a year. They put you in a placement. You come out, you write your exam and then you get certified. It still takes about a year. This is difficult for remote communities.

Even option one is difficult for remote communities. Many of the operators that I have brought up from Tsuut'ina do better in a hands-on situation. I even have my own personal belief that the school of hard knocks builds a better operator for a small system. It's constant support, constant training and constant mentorship.

As a manager, I spend two-thirds of my time in the field teaching my young operators.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Thank you very much for that. I appreciate it.

You also mentioned in your remarks, if I heard you correctly, that the operators on first nations, particularly in remote communities, are operating without access to appropriate resources.

Can you, again, go into a bit more detail on what specific resources are available outside of a first nation that are not available in that first nation?

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: There are many. Some places are so remote and so far up north that they have limited shovels to work with. If they break something as simple as a shovel or a pick, it could take a week to get to them. Let's think about that. That's mind-boggling.

Some resources are financial. I'm very fortunate with Tsuut'ina Nation. We're nestled right on the edge of Calgary. I'm a lucky one. If I break a part or if a piece of chemical injection tubing breaks, I could call up one of 10 contractors or businesses and tell them I'm sending an operator to grab these parts. That's not the case for many first nations operators. Something as simple as chemical injection tubing or fittings can become a major obstacle, and it's not necessarily because of poor planning; it's more that an operator comes in on the weekend and fixes a part here, and we're good to go. We like to build these systems to be robust, so before the next replacement part can come in, the same part breaks on another piece of equipment. It has happened time and time again.

Financial is one area and resources are another, and there is also just equipment overall.

Mr. Eric Melillo: Okay, thank you.

I think I have time for a very quick question, so I'll stick with you, Mr. Mitchell. I really appreciate what you've been sharing so far.

You also mentioned retention as one of your important recommendations. Has the government been putting any resources, or appropriate resources, at this point, into retention? Can you describe what the current situation is, in your view?

● (0945)

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: The TSAG, the Technical Services Advisory Group, does a really good job at building up operators. They do the best they can. A big problem for retention is within the communities themselves. I'm not sure if you're a small-town boy, but I am. Sometimes the politics within the small community you're raised in affect you. Sometimes it's the wrong last name. Sometimes it's who you're related to. You get pushed out.

I often refer to being an operator as working in the shadows. We do not get pats on the back. We really serve the community in a selfless manner until something goes wrong.

The Chair: Mr. Mitchell, I'm going to have to ask you to wrap up. We're over time here again.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: [*Inaudible—Editor*] reasons.

The Chair: With that, we're going to move to our second questioner.

Mr. Hanley, you have six minutes.

Mr. Brendan Hanley (Yukon, Lib.): Thank you very much.

Thank you to all of the witnesses today.

Dr. Reimer, I'm going to focus my questions on you.

Thanks for your testimony. You and I are both public health physicians and have had experience issuing boil water advisories. I wonder if you could talk about your experience issuing boil water advisories, particularly the effect on the community and the social effect.

Can you describe some of your experiences there?

Dr. Joss Reimer: Issuing a boil water advisory is not a minor decision. It causes incredible stress on a community, and on businesses as well, because it requires them to change everything about how they go about their daily lives, whether that's washing the dishes in a restaurant or preparing food at home or doing laundry. It's quite striking, when you see how a temporary boil water advisory can be so disruptive, to think that this is the daily reality for so many people.

In fact, in many cases, when the contaminants are not microbial and are not infectious, a boil water advisory won't even address the concerns. It may in fact make it worse, because you make the water more concentrated with whatever substance may be in it. This is something that we do in partnership with drinking water officers and indeed with operators. We very much value the expertise of the operators who are on the ground.

Advisories can cause dramatic effects in that community and for people trying to run their businesses in the community. It's for that reason that we support the passage of this bill, but we certainly do emphasize that within regulations, it would be important to ensure that the real costs of not just implementing water treatment and wastewater treatment but also the ongoing running of the infrastructure be included in discussions with first nations.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you.

Can you also describe community readiness? When it comes to lifting boil water advisories, you would usually offer guidance in that area. Apart from, obviously, the quality testing, can you comment on how else you assess or are involved in community readiness to lift boil water advisories?

Dr. Joss Reimer: One of the very challenging and less measurable effects is the fear that comes along with a boil water advisory. While there need to be multiple testings showing the water is safe in order to lift a boil water advisory, it's very challenging for a community to trust that this water they were just told was dangerous is now safe for consumption.

We're very thankful to the operators, the drinking water officers and all the folks who developed materials we can share with community members about how to function safely during and after a boil water advisory, but certainly that fear is not something that disappears immediately. It can have lasting effects, because those communities wonder whether this same problem may occur again and whether it's safe for their children to drink the water on a day-to-day basis.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you. That's very helpful.

As a public health physician, you clearly have familiarity in provincial legislation and working with regulations, both in interpreting and in helping to enforce regulations. How do you see the benefit of having this overarching federal legislation, Bill C-61? You urged us to pass this quickly. How do you see federal legislation as being helpful in ultimately enabling clean water in first nations communities?

● (0950)

Dr. Joss Reimer: We must put an end to the environmental racism that we've seen for far too long in this country, and the experiences of many indigenous peoples across the country are deeply unacceptable. While there is no bill that is perfect, this is an important first step in acknowledging the rights of indigenous peoples and the rights of first nations peoples, particularly in concordance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples, to ensure that they have self-determination over the resources that affect them on a day-to-day basis.

Therefore, while there will undoubtedly need to be a lot of discussion and partnership with many different jurisdictions, we still believe in the CMA that this is a critical first step in recognizing those rights and helping move things forward in a positive way.

Mr. Brendan Hanley: Thank you.

I have a little bit of time left. I was very interested that you brought up climate change and its relationship to health. I know that as an organization, CMA has done a lot of recent work on the relationship between climate change and health. Again, with your public health hat on, can you comment on the importance of recognizing and responding to climate change as it relates to protecting source water and supporting maintenance of clean water?

Dr. Joss Reimer: Water truly is life. It's needed for everything on a day-to-day basis. When we see the many effects of climate change—whether it's changing weather patterns that are leading to more heat-related illness and death, or wildfires that have caused both injury and respiratory conditions and the stress that comes along with it—protecting water is another element of that. With the changes in what infectious diseases can survive in different parts of the world, we see some of the shifts in what might be in the water. We see some invasive species that are taking hold in some parts.

I live in Manitoba, where Lake Manitoba has invasive species that are living in the lake, causing harm to that water and making it unsafe to use for many things. This is something that is interlinked and affects the health of all of us.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hanley.

[*Translation*]

Next up is Mr. Lemire for six minutes.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire (Abitibi—Témiscamingue, BQ): Thank you, Mr. Chair.

I thank all the witnesses for their contribution and their sensitivity to indigenous realities. Their testimony greatly advances our discussions. They also remind us that we are going to have to show sensitivity when we begin the clause-by-clause consideration of the bill.

Dr. Reimer, the Canadian Medical Association said last week that they had done a multi-year review of their archives and other documented interactions with indigenous communities. It uncovered a long history of harm caused by Canadian physicians.

How did you access data from federal hospitals? Has it been hard to get co-operation from health care institutions? Do you have information on all the provinces?

Dr. Joss Reimer: Thank you for your question.

[*English*]

For our review we accessed the data specific to the Canadian Medical Association, so we did a multi-year review of our specific records.

The Canadian Medical Association does not run any health systems or services directly. However, despite not doing that, we still found many incidents of prejudice and discrimination within our own records. Whether that was how we promoted physician income over the wellness of indigenous peoples, for example, there were things that were clear in our records.

We are also currently going through the Canadian Medical Association Journal to look at the research that has been published over the entirety of that journal's existence, and we expect those results to be ready in 2025.

In addition, we met with many indigenous community members and had a guiding circle made up of elders, knowledge keepers and indigenous physicians, who gave us a lot more information than what we could find in our records. For example, they expressed to us, despite its not being in our records, the role that physicians played in the sixties scoop, as well as in the ongoing overrepresentation of child apprehension that occurs with indigenous families, so that was included in our apology, as well as what we found directly in our records.

We don't have access to the hospital records directly, but we do have the records of how the association representing physicians communicated about and advocated—or rather, in many cases, didn't advocate—on behalf of people who were experiencing harms in those hospitals.

● (0955)

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: That is very useful.

I also feel that it is very hard for first nations to get access to the data on them. We saw proof of that at the inquiry into missing and murdered women, for one. It's very hard to get access to the data, particularly the health data. The process is still very useful, and I thank you for enlightening us on that matter.

How do you manage the ethical concerns raised by certain practices indicated in the specific report you just mentioned as well as in other reports?

[*English*]

Dr. Joss Reimer: During our assessment we used our code of ethics to guide some of the work we did. However, we also found that our code of ethics is insufficient when it comes to addressing racism and discrimination within the health care system. That's one of the commitments in our action plan. We're going to open up our code of ethics and do a review of how we need to improve that code, because it applies to all physicians in Canada: They must abide by this code of ethics. Therefore, one action item coming out of the apology is to strengthen the wording in that code of ethics so that all physicians are aware and are held to the standard that we should have been held to all along: protecting the health of indigenous peoples.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: What work has been done or is being done to explore the epigenetic impact on the health of indigenous communities?

[*English*]

Dr. Joss Reimer: The epigenetic effects were not specifically looked at in our review. That didn't appear in the documentation from the CMA. However, there is good research that these epigenetic effects do indeed occur and have long-lasting impacts on generations.

I don't know the answer to this at this point, but I wonder whether we may see some of that come up in the review of the Canadian Medical Association Journal, because there will certainly be evidence. I can hope that maybe it won't come up because it's not an example of racism but instead is a positive example of working in reconciliation; however, we don't yet know what we're going to find in that review.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: You touched on the issue, but I would like to take it a little further.

How could we make a concrete recommendation to integrate epigenetic impact analysis into public health policies, while ensuring that research funding prioritizes the specific needs of indigenous populations and at-risk groups?

[*English*]

Dr. Joss Reimer: Epigenetic effects refer, really, to the impact that certain traumas can have on generations going forward, even if the specific harm is not ongoing. When it comes to first nations communities, not only was there historical trauma, but there are ongoing harms as well, and so both of those circumstances apply in this situation.

I think it will be critical to have first nations' voices front and centre in the consultation around the regulations, making sure that their self-determination is consistent with the UNDRIP requirement that those voices are heard and valued in the regulations and in the decision-making about how costs should be assigned.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemire.

[*English*]

Next up, we have Ms. Blaney joining the committee today. You have six minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney (North Island—Powell River, NDP): Well, thank you, Chair. It's good to visit.

I used to sit on this committee, so I always enjoy a little bit of time back to talk about these really important realities.

I'm going to start with you first, Dr. Reimer, through the chair, of course.

You mentioned in your testimony that you have issued boil water advisories in first nations communities, and we know that prior to colonization—it's very clear from the history—first nations managed their water and had clean water, and it was a pretty good system they had in place.

I'm wondering if you could tell us a little bit about the difference between what it is like to call a boil water advisory in a first nations community compared, perhaps, to a community like mine. I think of Courtenay, which had a few boil water advisories.

● (1000)

Dr. Joss Reimer: Thank you so much for the question.

The jurisdictional divide does make it complicated when we're issuing temporary boil water advisories, and it may differ from province to province or territory as well.

In Manitoba, we have a public health physician who is on call 24-7 for the entire province, so if a boil water advisory needs to be issued, say, on the weekend, regardless of where it occurs, it would be that individual who issues it. However, come Monday morning, if it's a first nations community, we would need to work with the first nations and Inuit health branch, or whatever it is titled at that time, to ensure that the ongoing work, the official issuance, occurs with them.

Consistent with some of the challenges we've seen with Jordan's principle, it can add complexities when it's a provincial medical officer of health who's done the initial advisory, but it's on a first nations community that is under federal jurisdiction.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: I hear you when you say that it adds to the complexity, and that can make it a little more stressful. I'm just wondering, in terms of making those announcements and in terms of the community's response, if there's a uniqueness or something that we should better understand about what that feels like for the community.

I know in my riding—I'm in B.C.—I have a few very remote communities, and they have water systems that sometimes have huge challenges to them. It can be very stressful for them because, as another person testified today, you don't necessarily have the remedies to fix it because you are so very remote, and that just brings up such fear.

Could you talk about that impact on the community, not only on the health and well-being of their bodies, but maybe of their minds?

Dr. Joss Reimer: The more remote a community, the more stressful something like a boil water advisory can be, precisely because of what the other witness mentioned—there's a lack of resources, and it takes a longer time to find solutions and resources. In particular, on average, first nations communities have less access to resources, have lower income and so may face additional challenges in those solutions, regardless of where they're located.

Never having lived in a first nations community, I would defer to the chiefs and other first nations members who have spoken to this committee about their experiences. To me, as a non-indigenous physician, the challenges seem much higher when you have that lack of resources, as well as the jurisdictional challenges they may face.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

I'm going to go to Mr. Mitchell. I believe that's the name.

I'm just curious. You talked about the remoteness and the challenge of building capacity in some of these small remote communities. I guess my question is around resources, because what I've heard from some of the communities I represent is that often the government will give some money to fix those pipes, but if you want to train people to make sure that those pipes stay good, that's going to be another source of funding, and there might be some information, but the timing doesn't work, so that ongoing work of building capacity and spreading the knowledge around the community a little bit more tends to be a challenge.

I'm wondering if you could speak to that and whether that's something you've heard or experienced yourself.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: That's a great question. Respectfully, I would like to defer this to Deon. I believe he may be in a better position to answer it.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Perfect.

Mr. Deon Hassler (Board Member and Circuit Rider Trainer, Water Movement): My name is Deon Hassler. I'm a first nations circuit rider from Saskatchewan. I live in a first nation community. I work with many first nations communities. There are a lot of communities here. I'm also a leader in first nations, in different organizations.

From speaking across Canada, seeing all the different things and hearing all the different issues that we have across Canada, especially in remote communities like yours in B.C., I know that one of the big problems with remoteness is access—access to training and access to parts. In Manitoba, you have the ice roads, so you're cut off at certain times of the year. It's this type of situation. In northern Saskatchewan, it's fly-in too. We try to get our operators to training and get them trained, and we try to get them to do online training, but it doesn't always work.

We're still looking for solutions and a better way to do it. I don't really see this bill as supporting us, because this bill is basically saying that we're passing on authority or jurisdiction to the province. I don't see it contributing to what our needs really are. I don't really see us getting more funding, or adequate funding, for what we need to do in first nations—

● (1005)

The Chair: Mr. Hassler, I hate to do this again, but we're over time here. I'm going to have to cut you off, if you just want to quickly wrap up that thought.

Mr. Deon Hassler: I was just going to say that it's not unique. We've been struggling with this. We have a lack of education. We have first nations operators who come into our water plants and have very few skills, and some of them have not even completed high school, but non-first nations are taking a lot of their employees who are retired from other trades, so there's a difference. I've worked in non-first nation communities. I'm a veteran; I've served in the military, so I've seen both sides of this situation.

The Chair: Thank you very much.

That concludes our first round of questioning.

We're going to get four people in for the next round here. We'll start with Mr. Schmale for five minutes.

Mr. Jamie Schmale (Haliburton—Kawartha Lakes—Brock, CPC): Thanks so much, Mr. Chair.

Thank you to our witnesses.

I want to continue the line of questioning that my colleague Eric Melillo and some others around the table have been diving into with regard to the potential solutions that exist, especially given that I think we all agree that the technology is there to fix a lot of the drinking water problems, especially on reserve, and with regard to addressing some of the challenges that exist in remote communities.

I'm guessing that this question continues with the Water Movement, but it may even involve the professional engineer who has been on the call as well.

In today's day and age, the technology exists. The challenges you mentioned about weather, remoteness and transportation have been there for a long time. What is the roadblock? Some of these challenges aren't new. Where is it? We've been able to fix a lot of things. Why hasn't anybody been able to fix this?

I'm not blaming anyone; I just want to know. Is it the department? Is it municipalities and provinces not talking to each other? Where's the the roadblock here?

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: I'll take this one.

It's people. It's capacity building. It's unbelievably hard to build a successful team that has the knowledge and the expertise to deal with this technology. There's some great stuff out there.

I'm going to throw an example at you. Certain types of membrane filtration require a chemical cleaner. There are some plants that are far up in the remote north, and they have these systems. They were put in place by whatever form of government in the day, and they didn't take into account the thousands of pounds that they have to air freight up. It's the people. It's the fact that you can't have a team full of one-sided expertise. You need a balance. Yes, the technology is out there, but it's not as easy to work with as you may think. Some of this stuff is highly specialized. Again, remoteness plays a part. What if you're up north in Nunavut and you need a technician to fly out?

Part of it's funding and part of it's management, but a majority is people and capacity building. It's a team that keeps these systems running; it's not just an operator. I rely on a whole public works team to make sure that everything's running smoothly. I have a lagoon discharge next week. You want to bet that I'm working with the roads department to clear the culverts. It's simple things like that.

● (1010)

Mr. Jamie Schmale: Before I move on to my next question, does Mr. Hotchkies want to jump in?

Mr. James Hotchkies: Thank you.

I think that part of the problem I've seen, not just with Canada's first nations communities but elsewhere around the world, is that the models we have been using for both water and wastewater, particularly wastewater, basically date back to the early part of the 20th century.

Our basic waste-water technology, which uses an activated sludge process, a bacterial process, was patented in 1913. It really hasn't changed very much since then, but technology has advanced, and we have the ability to embrace newer technologies. Mr. Mitchell mentioned membrane solutions. They've been around for roughly five decades now, but they have evolved, and the solutions that were implemented 20 years ago and 30 years ago have been superseded by new innovations.

Part of the problem I find across Canada and in many other parts of the world is that we have models that were developed decades ago and we're still designing systems the way we did decades ago. We have engineering offices that are quite happy to continue to do the same things that they did years ago. We have a mindset that we have one model, whether it's for water or wastewater, that fits all applications, and you can't take the technology that works in Regina and put it into a first nations community that is 2,000 kilometres north of there.

I think the other problem we have related to being stuck in old thinking and old engineering practices is that we still continue to look at water and wastewater as two distinct issues, but basically we find problems around the world when we don't have waste-water people and water people talking to each other. We look at them as two different concepts—

The Chair: Thank you very much. I'm afraid that I'm going to have to interrupt you there, Mr. Hotchkies. I hate doing this, but we're going to have to move over to our next questioner, who is Mr. Scarpaleggia from the Liberal Party.

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia (Lac-Saint-Louis, Lib.): Thank you very much, Mr. Chair.

I think this is a fascinating panel. I've been sitting in on these meetings. We really have gone to the heart of the issue, which is a technological issue, a management issue and a financing issue, and I see everyone on the panel here really having the answers.

I mean, Mr. Hotchkies and Mr. Mitchell, you understand the operations of waste-water systems probably better than anyone else, and it seems that we have all the solutions. The question is, how do we build that capacity? How do we improve the management of waste water, including from the point of view of designing systems and so on? What's it going to take to move forward? Do we need some kind of catalyst?

Obviously, Public Works, in working with Indigenous and Northern Affairs, working with Environment Canada and working with outside engineers, hasn't solved the problem. We have had the best talent working on this issue for years and years, but somehow, through lack of coordination or because of people working in silos, we haven't been able to.... We've been installing plants that never became operational, I hear, but that were extremely expensive and top of the line.

What's the catalyst? Is the catalyst the first nations water commission that this bill will create? In your opinion, is that going to solve the problem?

We'll have Mr. Mitchell first, and then Mr. Hotchkies.

Mr. Desmond Mitchell: Thank you for the question.

The reality is that we're not lucky enough to have a “one fix” solution. There are many catalysts.

Pay equity is one. The lack of permanent consultation with the boots on the ground is another. Red tape on funding is one. There should be some form of water advisory committee that operators and managers like me and other people on this panel can discuss with.

● (1015)

Mr. James Hotchkies: Could I add some comments?

Mr. Francis Scarpaleggia: Yes, please.

Mr. James Hotchkies: I work with communities all over the world, basically from Singapore to New Zealand, and I have worked on projects all over the world. Canada used to have the number one expertise in water and wastewater. We had the Wastewater Technology Centre in Burlington and we had the Canada Centre for Inland Waters. We've lost that capability. I don't think we have the right type of dialogue going on between operators and communities and across the engineering community. We're not training people appropriately.

I think we do need a mechanism within Canada that looks at what's happening around the world in terms of decentralized technologies like minimum liquid discharge and zero liquid discharge for waste-water operations. Wastewater is 99.9% water, with a small amount of contaminants in there. We have the technologies to deal with that now. We just have to look at what technologies are most appropriate for communities that are not the size of Toronto, which has the Ashbridges Bay wastewater plant, which is probably the worst example we could use, because you never should treat wastewater at the end of the pipe. You should treat it at the source.

That is changing. In the same way that we've moved from centralized power and centralized communications to decentralized systems, we need to look at bringing that into the water space. We're starting to have a dialogue around that as we start to look at how to manage 6.5 million new people coming into Ontario. We're not going to do it by using the same models that we used in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. We have to start looking at different models and what's happening in other parts of the world.

I work with the U.S. EPA, and they have a complete group that's working on remote operations, whether it's with indigenous or non-indigenous communities in the middle of Arkansas, in the middle of Nebraska or in Alaska. We need to get a community dialogue going in Canada on how to identify technologies that are appropriate for the community, for the people who live in that community and for the problems they face in that community.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Mr. Hotchkies and Mr. Scarpaleggia.

I see Mr. Hassler has his hand up, but we're through the time for this round.

[*Translation*]

I will now give the floor to Mr. Lemire for two and a half minutes.

Mr. Sébastien Lemire: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

My question is for Mr. Hotchkies and the Water Movement representatives.

I would like to share a concern that we have seen on the ground. In fact, I commend my assistant, Meili Faille. I can't thank her enough for her major contribution to what we are presenting today.

In Chisasibi, in Quebec's far north, SNC-Lavalin is responsible for maintaining the drinking water system. They do so under a 50-year contract between the community and the company. If there is a breakdown or a problem arises, the community is required to deal with SNC-Lavalin for 50 years. Obviously, the head office is in Montreal, which is about a 15 or 20-hour drive from that area. Since planes are not always available, it means that work on the pipes can be delayed for several days.

I want to emphasize the importance of providing training, having operators on site and ensuring the self-determination of indigenous communities so that they can manage their budgets. Another important matter is that they not be in the grip of monopolies by white companies—for that is what they are—from the southern part of the province or elsewhere. They have a monopoly, impose an obligation and charge fees.

How can these situations be rectified? How can we give first nations more autonomy? How can we ensure that there is better collaboration and knowledge retention among indigenous people?

● (1020)

[*English*]

Mr. James Hotchkies: I can take a stab at that, if you like.

We work with a lot of remote communities, not necessarily in Canada. It could be a remote community in the middle of the Caribbean that also has an issue when you try to find a spare part or a valve or something. They don't exist. We just started a system down there. They don't even have the right types of valves to put on the system.

To answer your question, companies like SNC-Lavalin are fabulous engineering companies, but a lot of their expertise, particularly in the water and engineering department, is that they're looking at systems from a large centralized utility model. I don't care whether it's SNC-Lavalin, Jacobs engineering or Veolia; their expertise has really developed around large capital-intensive projects—

The Chair: Mr. Hotchkies, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to wrap up that thought quickly.

Mr. James Hotchkies: Okay.

I'll come back. I think we need to start looking at a different model, a decentralized model that gets away from the typical types of systems we see in large communities. That is part of the dialogue I was talking about in going with smaller communities. It doesn't matter whether it's a first nations community or a small community in the middle of Ontario: You need to have different models.

[*Translation*]

The Chair: Thank you, Mr. Lemire.

[*English*]

For our last round of questioning, it's my pleasure to turn the microphone over to Ms. Blaney for two and a half minutes.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you, Chair.

I want to spend some more time with Mr. Hassler.

I really appreciated your response. Also, thank you for your service, sir. You let us know that you're a veteran, and I really appreciate your service to our country.

Again, I do want to go back to the building of capacity within indigenous communities. We know that finding training in remote indigenous communities can be a challenge, and we know that often the funds are not there to provide the resources required to have the training in a way that actually allows for a sharing of knowledge.

Then, of course, one of the things I've noticed in the community I come from is that you do training and you may train several people, but of course those people aren't given an opportunity to keep doing the work, which means that they lose a lot of that knowledge, and that cycle continues. I'm wondering if you could speak to what the needs are in indigenous communities in terms of building that training capacity so that there are more people who know how to do the work, honouring that unique environment.

Mr. Deon Hassler: That's a great question. It's something that I'm really dealing with right now, because with our operators.... At my age, I want to retire pretty soon here, but we have new operators coming into the field. A lot of our operators are underpaid and don't want to come into the water field because, there again, there's an old saying about whether you can live on this salary. A lot of our operators are getting minimum wage, and some of our operators are getting less than minimum wage to operate these plants. What interest are they getting? What kind of people are going to come in and be a water plant operator and do the training?

There are other jobs that pay better, like being a security person. We've been losing these people over the years to mining and security jobs. We just have to find a way to attract these people into the industry. I know that here in Saskatchewan, we've developed an association, and it's all first nations led and grassroots. This way, we have more participants coming and even networking together and trying to find solutions within themselves. They feel more comfortable that they're all first nations working together to find better solutions.

This bill also goes to the responsibility of engineering. Ever since I came in, a lot of our water plants weren't designed properly to treat some of the water that we've been going.... With the wrong designs for these water plants, some of the engineering designs, who's responsible for that? We keep getting wrong designs.

We have found some designs here in Saskatchewan that are unique and that work for us, because Saskatchewan has a different groundwater quality that other provinces don't really experience—

● (1025)

The Chair: Mr. Hassler, could I get you to wrap up that thought? I'm afraid we are over time again.

Mr. Deon Hassler: Well, as I said, I think pay is one thing that we have to look for to support our operators. I think that's the most important thing we need to do.

Ms. Rachel Blaney: Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you very much, Ms. Blaney.

Certainly, Mr. Hassler, thank you for your service.

Also, thank you for all of the services that our witnesses are doing in communities right across the country.

I thought it was really fascinating to learn a lot more about some of the operational challenges that are facing us. I wish we had more time to do this. If there is anything that our witnesses weren't able to get to that they want to share with the committee, I invite them to share that in writing. That would be helpful as we move ahead with this legislation and go into clause-by-clause consideration.

Please don't hesitate to share that if you have any other thoughts.

I just want to thank all of you for your testimony today and for taking the time to do this. It's much appreciated.

With that, we will wrap up the meeting.

Is it the will of the committee to adjourn?

Some hon. members: Agreed.

The Chair: The meeting is adjourned.