



# NEWS RELEASE

**For Immediate Release**

July 30, 2019

## **Ministry of Health, PHO need to do more to ensure safety of drinking water**

VICTORIA – The Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia has released a report: *The Protection of Drinking Water: An Independent Audit*.

The office concluded that the Ministry of Health and the Provincial Health Officer (PHO) are not sufficiently protecting drinking water for all British Columbians.

“We undertook this audit because of the considerable importance of safe drinking water, and because the risks to drinking water are increasing”, said Carol Bellringer, auditor general.

Climate change, industrial activity and a growing population all have an impact on B.C.’s drinking water.

“We found that overall, the Ministry of Health and the PHO’s accountability to ensure drinking water was protected is concerning.” Bellringer said.

The oversight of drinking water is complex, it involves many ministries, agencies, and pieces of legislation. To ensure clear accountability, government stated that the Ministry of Health would provide leadership and coordination, and the PHO would oversee government and those delivering drinking water to all British Columbians.

While the ministry has taken some action to mitigate risks to drinking water, more needs to be done. Specifically, the ministry does not know which water systems are at risk and has not developed a strategy to address them.

The risks of contamination are intensified in small water systems where some communities may struggle to afford sufficient water protection systems and find staff who are qualified in water treatment. The ministry’s actions to address issues in small water systems, which are generally found in rural areas, has been limited. There are approximately 4,800 known drinking water systems in B.C. About 90% of these systems are small water systems that collectively serve approximately 480,000 people.

Overall, the Ministry of Health did not demonstrate leadership in ensuring continuous improvement to the protection of drinking water. The various ministries and agencies have not implemented many of the recommendations from the PHO’s past reports that could have led to further progress. Lastly, both the Ministry of Health and the PHO have not kept government sufficiently apprised of the ongoing risks to drinking water.



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of British Columbia

“Thankfully, B.C. has not had a known outbreak of water borne illness since 2004, but just a single event that contaminates a drinking water system can cause serious health impacts for numerous people,” said Bellringer.

The office made eight recommendations in the report. Of these, five are to the Ministry of Health and include providing leadership to co-ordinate the ministries, undertaking a legislative review, identifying risks and developing a strategic plan, and reporting out to the public. The other three recommendations are to the PHO. They include taking action to improve its oversight, reviewing legislation, monitoring progress and trends, and reporting out on a timely basis.

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The full report is available on the Office of the Auditor General website at [www.bcauditor.com](http://www.bcauditor.com).

Bellringer will answer questions pertaining to the report via a news conference.

News Conference Date: Tuesday, July 30, 2019

Time: 11:30 a.m. (Pacific time)

Dial-in Information:

From Vancouver: 604 681-0260

From elsewhere in Canada and the USA: 1 877 353-9184

Participant Pass Code: 44848#

During question and answer period:

To ask a question: press 01

To exit the question queue: press #

**About the Office of the Auditor General of British Columbia**

The auditor general is a non-partisan, independent officer of the legislature who reports directly to the legislative assembly. The *Auditor General Act* empowers the auditor general and staff to conduct audits, report findings and make recommendations.

Contact us:

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