

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH COMMITTEE'S ROLE IN NEW DRINKING WATER ACT

The BCMA's Environmental Health Committee recently helped shape the province's Drinking Water Protection Amendment Act, passed in October 2002, into comprehensive and effective legislation. With the legislation approved and proclaimed in force, the Environmental Health Committee's Subcommittee on Water Quality is working to ensure the government passes and implements effective and appropriate regulations for safe drinking water.

The Environmental Health Committee identified a serious problem, determined new comprehensive legislation was needed, and took a coordinated, multilevel approach to bring about change and ensure the government dealt with drinking water quality issues. The BCMA's involvement in the process of creating safe drinking water legislation is an example of how the BCMA can play an important role in influencing government policy and ensuring that public health is protected.

The Water Quality subcommittee spent years striving to improve water quality regulation in BC, with the goal of establishing a consistent administrative framework that would set appropriate standards of water quality. For many years, the previous government had little to no interest in this issue. However, the tainted drinking water crises in Walkerton, Ontario, and North Battleford, Saskatchewan, forced the BC government to quickly make water quality protection a priority. The result was the Drinking Water Protection Act, which was passed by the previous government in spring 2001. However, this legislation was never proclaimed in force by that government.

The Environmental Health Committee recognized that this hasty legislation contained many flaws, so it set out to bring these flaws to the attention of the current government and have the legislation amended and proclaimed.

The committee also presented a series of resolutions on water quality to the BCMA Annual General Meeting in June 2001. These resolutions were adopted, and thereafter became official BCMA policy. They recommended comprehensive drinking water legislation and regulations be implemented without delay, and that the Ministry of Health should be solely responsible for administering such legislation. The Environmental Health Committee felt the Drinking Water Protection Act was flawed in its promotion of having drinking water protection dually regulated by the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Environment, Lands and Water.

The Environmental Health Committee brought its concerns about the legislation to the present government in the summer of 2001 through a meeting with health minister Colin Hansen. The meeting - attended by Mr. Garth Evans, chair of the Water Quality subcommittee; Dr. Bill Meekison, chair of the Environmental Health Committee, Dr. Heidi Oetter, then-BCMA president, and Dr. Mark Schonfeld, executive director of the BCMA - resulted in a fruitful discussion with the minister of health. Shortly thereafter, the minister established the Drinking Water Review Panel to review and make recommendations on the Drinking Water Protection Act and related matters. Also, as a result of that meeting, the minister took steps to ensure the BCMA was represented on the Drinking Water Review Panel.

Dr. Meekison was appointed to represent the BCMA and to ensure the review panel heard the BCMA's views clearly. Over the past year, he repeatedly met with the Water Quality subcommittee to examine and discuss issues raised by the panel. The Water Quality subcommittee also reviewed the panel's preliminary report with Dr. Meekison and recommended a number of changes, most of which were accepted by the review panel.

The resulting Drinking Water Protection Amendment Act was passed by the legislature in October 2002. The amended Act will be proclaimed in force when the regulations have been finalized. The amended legislation is a vast improvement over the original legislation and implements most of the changes requested by the BCMA. The Environmental Health Committee is working with the government on the remaining step of drafting the regulations provided for in the Act.

- Garth Evans
Environmental Health Committee

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