

North Okanagan residents drinking tainted water have 'fraction of hope' after hearing government action plan

By Charlotte Helston

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Manure is spread on a 210 acre field above the aquifer in summer 2015.

Image Credit: Al Price

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SPALLUMCHEEN - The provincial government is encouraging local farmers to adopt best practices as part of a nine-part action plan to address drinking water issues in the North Okanagan.

The action plan was presented to local stakeholders at a private meeting in Spallumcheen today, March 21. Representatives from the Ministry of Environment, Interior Health Authority, Ministry of Lands, Forests and Natural Resources, and the Save Hullcar Aquifer Team were present, however no media were permitted.

About 200 residents supplied by the Steele Springs Water District, which pulls water from the Hullcar Aquifer, have been on a drinking water advisory for two years due to high nitrate levels — which are linked to serious health issues such as blue baby syndrome. Residents, and the Environmental Law Centre at the University of Victoria, argue the source of the contamination is a farm above the aquifer that spreads liquid manure on the field. They have asked the Interior Health Authority to order an immediate moratorium on the application of effluent.

The issue has been the focus of significant media attention in recent months, as well as heated debate in the legislature. Now, the inter-agency working group made up of health and environment officials says it is taking 'immediate steps' to ensure residents have access to safe drinking water.

Christa Zacharias-Homer, with the Ministry of Environment, says one of the first steps is happening this afternoon with government officials sitting down with members of the local agricultural industry.

"The purpose this afternoon is to persuade the agricultural industry to adopt the (Environmental Farm Plan)," Zacharias-Homer says, adding the program is voluntary. "It's a tool that provides a common understanding of best management practices for agriculture, including utilization of nutrients."

Other aspects of the plan involve reviewing water quality data and relevant legislation, implementing an enhanced monitoring program, working with other agencies like UBC Okanagan and the Okanagan Basin Water Board, and publicly sharing information on the Ministry of Environment website.

In a press release issued shortly after the meeting, the Ministry of Environment stated it's still unknown exactly where the nitrates are coming from.

"Previous analysis suggests a combination of factors is likely affecting the Hullcar aquifer and it will take multiple actions by provincial and local government, agriculture industry and the community to improve water quality," states the release.

In the release, Minister of Environment Mary Polak said all necessary actions will be taken to make sure the residents have safe drinking water, while also "preserving the region's agriculture economy."

Local resident Al Price attended the meeting Monday morning and says he left with a 'fraction of hope' that government officials will finally be taking action on the issue.

"I feel that we impressed upon them our need for a more speedy resolution, and I think they heard that. Whether they're able to act on it is another matter. Obviously, government wheels turn slowly. But, I think they're aware of how serious we are, and they're aware of the sense of urgency we feel," Price says.

He says a similar meeting was held a year ago, with little to show for it. He's hoping to see results this time.

"We never heard from anyone again, it was as if we didn't exist," Price says. "I said quite plainly today that will not happen again, and I was assured it wouldn't."

He believes it's quite clear the application of liquid manure is leading to the high nitrate levels, evidenced by a compliance order in March 2014 limiting the amount of effluent permitted on the field.

"The ministries say they can't pinpoint the problem, but everybody in the North Okanagan — at least everybody in the Hullcar Valley knows what the majority of the problem is. If you take out the source of contamination you know of, if there are others, then you can more readily find them," Price says.

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