

July 5, 2024

SENT ELECTRONICALLY

The Honourable Doug Ford
Premier of Ontario
Legislative Building, Room 281
Queens Park
Toronto, ON M7A 1A1

Mr. Michael Sherar
President and CEO of Public Health Ontario
661 University Avenue, Suite 1701
Toronto, ON M5G

The Honourable Sylvia Jones
Minister of Health / Deputy Premier
777 Bay Street, College Park, 5th Floor
Toronto, ON M7A 2J3

Dear Premier Ford, Minister Jones, and Mr. Sherar:

RE: Recommendations on Access to Free Private Well Water Testing

On behalf of the Board of Health for North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit (Health Unit), please accept this correspondence recommending not only the continuation of free private well water testing services but also a coordinated service plan that considers geographical areas from which private water samples are collected and maintains the integrity of samples to be tested.

The report from the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario's (OAGO) Value-for-Money Audit of Public Health Ontario (PHO) identified PHO's plan to gradually discontinue private water testing, along with consolidation of laboratory sites and discontinuation of testing for certain diseases. The OAGO recommended that PHO in conjunction with the Ministry of Health (MOH) update and implement the plan within 12 months to streamline public health laboratory operations.

Individuals who rely on drinking water from a private well or treated lake water utilize free water testing services provided by PHO to know if their drinking water is potable (safe to drink). The testing identifies the presence of bacterial indicators of contamination (e.g. *E. coli*) that cause illnesses ranging from mild to severe, and even cause death in rare circumstances.

Within the Health Unit's district, over 7,800 drinking water samples were submitted for testing by district residents in 2023. Of those samples submitted in 2023, 660 (9%) had significant evidence of bacterial contamination and 168 (2%) were unsafe to drink with evidence of sewage contamination. These results highlight the importance of testing drinking water from private water sources. The data also shows that 353 (5%) of samples were not processed for testing, because the samples were too old (outside the recommended timeframe). This could be due to excessive time between when the sample was taken and when it was dropped-off, or because of courier delays in transporting it to the laboratory.

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Furthermore, we are aware that private water testing is underutilized; only a small proportion of individuals who rely on private drinking water test their water at the recommended frequency of three times per year (Spring, Summer, Fall). If PHO Laboratory divests of private drinking water testing, this could cause longer transit times for samples, resulting in the failure to process more samples, and even greater underutilization of testing. This decrease in access could increase the potential for water-borne illness.

At its meeting on June 26, 2024, the Board of Health carried the following resolution #BOH/2024/06/06:

Whereas, private water testing is currently available through Public Health Ontario laboratories to residents who rely on drinking water from a private well or treated lake water to verify that their drinking water is potable; and

Whereas, the Honourable Minister Sylvia Jones has provided verbal reassurances on multiple occasions that private water testing will remain free to the residents of Ontario; and

Whereas, rural areas of Ontario comprise a higher volume of private water sources and will potentially be most impacted if cost-saving measures do not consider ruralism for private water testing services, including transportation of the sample by the resident to the point of drop off, and delivery from the point of drop off to the lab; and

Whereas, private water testing is already underutilized by residents and further changes to accessibility of water testing could further reduce utilization, putting residents at risk of consuming non-potable water and the potential for water-borne illness; and

Whereas, the Office of the Auditor General of Ontario report also identified quality improvement opportunities for coordination and communication of courier services used to transport water samples which may contribute to cost reductions without impacting Ontario residents, and also maintain the integrity of the sample being tested (reduce the number of samples rejected from the laboratory due to not arriving within the required timeframe).

Therefore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health for the North Bay Parry Sound District Health Unit recommends that Public Health Ontario within its quality improvement plan, assesses the geographical areas from which private water samples are collected and, with the support of the Ministry of Health ensures that drop-off locations, courier services and laboratories are coordinated to meet the needs of those geographies and maintain the integrity of the sample being tested; and

Furthermore Be It Resolved, That the Board of Health provide correspondence of these resolutions to the Honourable Doug Ford (Premier), the Honourable Sylvia Jones (Ontario Minister of Health), Victor Fedeli, MPP (Nipissing), Graydon Smith, MPP (Parry Sound-Muskoka), John Vanthof, MPP (Timiskaming-Cochrane), Michael Sherar (President and CEO of Public Health Ontario), Ontario Boards of Health, the Association of Local Public Health Agencies (alPHA), and member municipalities.

Sincerely,



Rick Champagne (Jul 8, 2024 21:35 EDT)

Rick Champagne
Chairperson, Board of Health



Dr. Carol Zimbalatti (Jul 8, 2024 16:06 EDT)

Carol Zimbalatti, M.D., CCFP, MPH
Medical Officer of Health/Executive Officer

/sb

Copy to:

Vic Fedeli, MPP, Nipissing
Graydon Smith, MPP, Parry Sound-Muskoka
John Vanthof, MPP, Timiskaming-Cochrane
Ontario Boards of Health
Association of Local Public Health Agencies (ALPHA)
Health Unit Member Municipalities