

# Wanted: water watchdog

*Province hiring consultant to review water supply systems*

By **BARR SWEET**  
THE TELEGRAM

The operation and maintenance of drinking water systems in the province will go under the microscope in a study this year.

The province has called for a consultant to examine how the operation and maintenance of the systems is affecting the state of drinking water infrastructure and the quality of the water.

"One of the main contributing factors to the large number of communities with drinking water quality issues is the lack of proper operation and maintenance of drinking water systems," states the study's terms of reference.

"In many cases, once capital works are passed over to the community to manage, they are left to deteriorate without any type of operational best-management practices or preventative maintenance. As a result, infrastructure in Newfoundland and Labrador does not typically live out its expected useful life, communities experience substandard service, and the province and the communities incur increased cost to replace non-functioning infrastructure."

Of the 536 public water supply systems in the province, 447 have some type of quality problem — 285 are classified as needing a high level of improvement, 150 a moderate need and 12 a low need.

There are more than 200 boiler water advisories in the province and water-quality issues include high levels of disinfection byproducts and excessive contaminants.

Most of the problems are in smaller communities, according to the terms of reference.

"The province offers plenty of logistical issues in trying to provide high-quality drinking water to numerous geographically dispersed small rural communities," the document states.

"Many communities are faced with multiple socio-economic challenges relating to high debt-to-service ratios, limited and declining tax base, lack of trained and skilled operators and systems operated and maintained by volunteers."

Graham Letto, president of Municipalities Newfoundland and Labrador, said the study is a positive step.

"It's something we've been asking for for a long time," said the Labrador City mayor.

"There are 200 boiler orders in place. That's totally unacceptable for what is 2009 now... this has gone on far too long."

He said some of the systems are getting old and many communities don't even have proper water systems. But among the communities that do have them, a lot don't have the resources or training in place to manage them properly.

"There's such a diverse number of systems out there. There's not a one-size-fits-all solution. I'm hoping this study will recognize that and identify the issues," Letto said.

Meanwhile, federal regulations for water and sewer are getting stricter.

Letto said while that's a good thing for the environment, municipalities need money to meet the standards.

And he said some of the smaller communities must regionalize their water supplies to share proper qualified staff.

"That's starting to catch on," he said, adding, the provincial government has invested several million dollars into water infrastructure, and that's a start.

bsweet@thetelegram.com