

Canada Safe Drinking Water Act

including domestic use, and will be of significant value to ensure Canadians a good quality water supply.

Mr. Speaker, my Department and other federal Departments as well as the provinces work with zeal on another project. I refer to guidelines concerning the quality of surface water, a project leading to the setting of standards on the quality of water. If I may, Mr. Speaker, I should like to make a few remarks on the aims of standards for the quality of water and their use. The quality of water is usually measured on the basis of its capacity to meet various needs. Is the water drinkable? Can it allow the growth of healthy schools of fish or the benthos? Will a direct contact with water provoke a skin rash? Is the water adequate to irrigate the land or to water the cattle? It may be difficult to answer those questions which seems so simple especially if we consider that the accessibility of drinking water depends on public perception and the availability of adequate treatment techniques.

Fisheries depend on the management of fish species and the food chain. The industry of aquatic recreation is growing even in areas with a low recreational potential. The quality of water for irrigation depends on the type of soil and culture. It is possible to answer those questions by drawing up or selecting criteria to determine relevant qualities for a particular use. From those criteria, quality standards are set and applied by organizations to manage water resources normally intended for various uses. Those standards provide acceptable or desirable concentration limits for various matters found in water, in sediments or in biotas.

I also want to mention the National Conference on critical issues related to the quality of drinking water held last February and organized by the Federation of Canadian Environmental Associations. Delegates from Canada, the United States and Europe attended this conference. While the participants shared to some extent the same concerns for the quality of drinking water, they did not agree on the seriousness of the problem and even less on the way to solve it. It is important to take these opinions into account before introducing a bill in this House.

On the other hand, I wish to emphasize that there is no shortage of laws and regulations related to water resources. Indeed, there are already 15 major federal statutes and 82 provincial laws in this area, for a total of nearly 100. Before introducing another bill, we must make sure, like the Minister of National Health and Welfare is certainly doing at this time, that we understand the problem and have examined all the legislative options available.

Mr. Speaker, it is obvious that Bill C-12 is based on good intentions, but it does not really constitute an adequate mechanism to promote harmony between the Federal Government and the provinces and to protect and improve the quality of drinking water in Canada. I have already explained how the Department of National Health and Welfare, in co-operation with several other departments including my own and the inquiry committee, is now examining this question.

I therefore recommend that Bill C-12 be withdrawn until my colleague, the Hon. Minister of National Health and Welfare, can introduce his own bill which will allow the House to review in depth federal concerns related to drinking water.

[English]

Mr. Tom Hockin (London West): Mr. Speaker, as the Hon. Member for London West I am pleased to participate in this debate. My riding is surrounded by three beautiful lakes. The occasionally turbulent Medway Creek and the beautiful Thames River also run through my riding. London has a system of wells which are among the most elaborate and the earliest in the history of Canada. The question of water drinkability and water safety concerns me and my constituents.

For this reason I wanted to explore and outline the system of protection and enhancement which exists at the federal level. In reviewing the Bill it is necessary to be aware of the responsibilities of the federal and provincial Governments. Also it is necessary to be aware of the areas of close co-operation between those two levels. This is an important concern in a Bill such as this one where there is a need for full and complete discussion with the provinces. The federal Government is already deeply involved in drinking water safety as are the provincial agencies.

I should like to review the range of activities carried out by the Government so that we may better put this Act into perspective. It should be appreciated that we are already involved in a wide range of activities, some of which go beyond the scope of the proposed Bill. About 85 per cent of Canadians obtain their drinking water from municipal water distribution systems. These systems include facilities for both the distribution of water and the provision of the treatment necessary to ensure safe water. While about 90 per cent of municipalities in Canada have water disinfection facilities, only about a third of them have filtration systems, a basic component of conventional water treatment. There is a great deal of regional disparity in the country in the availability of treated water. Few municipalities have facilities which could be called state of the art.

Responsibility for matters relating to drinking water supplies in Canada is, like many things, multijurisdictional. Responsibilities are shared among federal departments and provincial and municipal Governments. The provinces have the primary responsibility to protect and control water sources from which water supplies are drawn. That is their primary responsibility. Also they are to define the standards which drinking water must meet. Municipalities and water utilities are generally delegated authority to produce and deliver safe drinking water to residents. The federal Government has similar responsibilities within federal lands and territories. In addition, federal responsibilities include the conduct of research to assess water quality and to develop guidelines for drinking water quality. The federal and provincial Governments share responsibility for international water sources such as the Great Lakes.