

Ontario must investigate new chemicals in water, says environmental commissioner

CP Wire

Mon 02 Jul 2007

Section: National General News

Byline: BY CHINTA PUXLEY

TORONTO (CP) - Ontario must do more to investigate whether potentially dangerous chemicals in the water supply coming from everyday shampoos, soaps and pharmaceuticals pose a threat to people's health and the ecosystem, the province's environmental commissioner says.

There is a pressing need for the province not just to monitor the spread of such chemicals, but to spend millions on research and get on top of the threat posed by pharmaceuticals and personal care products (PPCPs), Gord Miller said.

The chemicals, which are showing up in water around the world, come from farm activity, antibiotics or other discarded medication that is poured down the toilet or sink, medication found in human waste, and run-off from antibacterial soaps and shampoos.

They travel through the septic system and can make their way back into source and drinking water because sewage treatment plants aren't equipped to get rid of them.

In her recent annual report on Ontario's drinking water, Environment Minister Laurel Broten highlighted PPCPs as an emerging threat and said the province is doing a "survey" to find out how much of the chemicals are in the province's water.

But Miller _ who warned about the threat of pharmaceuticals in his 2005 annual report _ said that's not enough. The province should put millions into investigating the impact the chemicals are having on animals and their ecosystems to determine what they might do to humans, Miller said in an interview.

"We tend to focus primarily on human health," Miller said. "That's important, but the alarms go off too late if you're already poisoning people."

It's an increasing problem that the province needs to get on top of, he added.

"We have to spend some money now to find out what's going on."

The threat is only going to grow, Miller said, as the population continues to grow, people use more medication and the baby boomers age.

Maureen Carter-Whitney, research director with the Canadian Institute for Environmental Law and Policy, said scientists are still trying to determine just what impact pharmaceutical chemicals can have on both humans and animals.

Generally, she said the chemicals are only found in the water in small amounts. But, she said, they are ``always there."

Studies conducted in northwestern Ontario suggest the chemicals can contribute to infertility in animals, delayed reproductive development and damage to the liver and kidneys.

The chemicals can also contribute to antibiotic resistance, Carter-Whitney said.

``It's at the point where it's a threat, but it's a threat we need to start doing something about," she said.

``It's the whole notion of the precautionary principle. We don't want to wait another 20 years and realize we have a whole generation of infertile young men."

Jim Smith, the province's chief drinking-water inspector, said Ontario has one of the most sophisticated systems in the world to protect its drinking water. The system has been strengthened since the Walkerton tainted water tragedy of May 2000, when E. coli contamination caused seven deaths and thousands of illnesses, he said.

There are always emerging threats that the province is now required to publicly report on and investigate, he said. The Liberal government set aside \$400,000 last year to fund 20 research projects examining PPCPs and labs are now working on analyzing this set of chemicals, Smith said.

It will likely take the province up to five years to get a handle on the current science and act on it, Smith said.

``As chief inspector, do I feel that I'm being protected? Yes. Do I feel that the right steps are being taken? Yes," Smith said. ``We're as current as any leading jurisdiction in the world."

Environment Minister Laurel Broten said the province does need to get ``a better understanding" of these emerging chemicals and the threat they could pose in drinking water. The \$400,000 in provincial funding is a ``very big move forward," she said.

``We know that Ontario has incredibly safe drinking water and we want to make sure that we continue to have safe, clean drinking water and that we are always vigilant," she said. ``This is an issue we take very seriously."

The province is waiting on the federal government to develop standards on how much of these chemicals are acceptable in source and tap water. It is also conducting its own studies, including one which found some 50 different types of PPCPs in the Grand River just outside of Hamilton.

People can do their part as well to keep such chemicals out of the system in the first place by returning their old or unused medication to a pharmacy which can dispose of it properly, Broten said.