



BRIEFING NOTE TO THE BOARD OF HEALTH
Proposed Phase-Out of Private Well Water Testing

BACKGROUND

The 2023 Auditor General's Report [Value-for-Money Audit: Public Health Ontario](#) indicates:

- "In 2017, Public Health Ontario proposed a joint modernization plan to update its public health laboratory, collaboratively with Ministry staff at the request of the Deputy Minister, that would have resulted in [...] the gradual discontinuation of private drinking water testing." (Page 23)
- "The most recent iteration of [their] modernization plan, presented by Public Health Ontario to the Ministry in January 2023, [...] again recommended the gradual discontinuation of private drinking water testing." (Page 24)

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

At the May 23, 2024 Board of Health meeting members discussed the correspondence received from municipalities advocating for continued free private well water testing. Concern has been expressed that rural residents of LGL will be impacted by this recommendation, should it be implemented. Further data from staff was requested outlining the number of well water tests in the region and the possible impact on residents.

Data about private wells is relatively limited, and not maintained directly by the Health Unit. The following information uses provincial datasets and research studies about private well water:

- There have been ~43,500 domestic wells drilled since 1899 in the LGL region. It is not known how many wells are currently active. Some of these wells may be multi-purpose (for example, used for a combination of livestock, commercial, and domestic use), or their purpose have shifted over time.
- The number of private water samples from the LGL region submitted to the Public Health Ontario Lab for testing were:
 - o 8,764 samples in 2023, of which 664 samples (7.6%) had evidence of bacterial contamination and 186 samples (2.1%) had E. coli growth
 - o 3,673 samples from the beginning of 2024 until June 12th, 2024, of which 220 samples (6.0%) had evidence of bacterial contamination and 50 samples (1.4%) had E. coli growth
 - o Note that some number of these samples are multiple samples of the same well, which may happen as part of routine sampling or in response to an adverse water result.

- There are no estimates of testing rates for private wells in the LGL region specifically, but Ontario estimates indicate that ~25% of households test at least once a year and ~10% test three times per year.¹
- One modelling study estimates that contaminated private well water causes ~4900 cases of acute gastrointestinal illness per year in Ontario, which translates to ~300 cases per 100,000 people using private wells.²

Board members had proposed during the previous meeting to write a letter in support of continued free private drinking water testing for residents. Below is a potential draft of this letter.

WHEREAS the Ontario Auditor General's [Value-for-Money Audit on Public Health Ontario](#) from December 2023 indicates that Public Health Ontario has “recommended the gradual discontinuation of private drinking water testing” and that Public Health Ontario intends to implement this “upon receipt of Ministry approval to proceed”; and

WHEREAS free private drinking water testing services has played a pivotal role in safeguarding public health, particularly in rural communities, including in the Leeds, Grenville and Lanark region; and

WHEREAS the removal of free private drinking water testing could lead to a reduction in bacterial testing of private well water, potentially increasing the risk of waterborne diseases;

BE IT RESOLVED that the Leeds, Grenville, and Lanark District Health Unit requests that the Province of Ontario continue to offer free bacterial testing for private drinking water, whether through Public Health Ontario or some other means.

FURTHER BE IT RESOLVED that this resolution be sent to Dr. Michael Sherar, President and CEO of Public Health Ontario and the Honourable Sylvia Jones, Deputy Premier and Minister of Health and copied to the Honourable Andrea Khanjin, Minister of Environment Conservation and Parks, MPP Steve Clark Leeds-Grenville-Thousand Islands and MPP John Jordan Lanark-Frontenac-Kingston.

Submitted by:

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References

1. Latchmore, T., Hynds, P.D., Brown, R.S., Schuster-Wallace, C., Dickson-Anderson, S., McDermott, K., Majury, A., 2020. Analysis of a large spatiotemporal groundwater quality dataset, Ontario 2010–2017: Informing human health risk assessment and testing guidance for private drinking water wells. *Science of the Total Environment* 738 (2020) 140382.
2. Latchmore, T., Hynds, P.D., Brown, R.S., McDermott, K., Majury, A., 2023. Assessing the risk of acute gastrointestinal illness attributable to three enteric pathogens from contaminated private water wells in Ontario. *International Journal of Hygiene and Environmental Health* 248 (2023) 114077.