

February 26, 2002

PIPELINE

Close to two years after the tragedy in Walkerton, the Conservative government continues to put temporary and insufficient resources into Ontario's drinking water inspection, investigation and enforcement programs, says a new report by OPSEU.

OPSEU submitted the report to the Ministry of the Environment's (MOE) new Assistant Deputy Minister responsible for the implementation of the Walkerton Inquiry's recommendations on Feb. 26. The report is based on interviews with MOE staff and Ministry financial data.

The report is an in-depth investigation of the MOE branches that play key roles in water protection. OPSEU found that:

- The MOE continues to lose skilled and experienced staff;
- Water quality compliance requirements are being delayed due to resource shortages;
- Staff now working on water issues are being diverted from other important environmental requirements;
- Recent additional resources for key water protection functions are temporary and staff fear they will be allowed to lapse when attention turns away;
- MOE Senior Managers and Management Board are resisting efforts to increase training, as recommended by the Walkerton Inquiry;
- There is a lack of confidence among staff in the Ministry's much-touted information management project.

The report is posted on OPSEU's web site at www.opseu.org/walkerton/index.htm.

In his Part One report of the Walkerton Inquiry, Justice O'Connor said that "budget reductions... made it less likely that the MOE would pursue proactive measures that would have prevented or limited the tragedy."

O'Connor went on to say that the government's "distaste for regulation" meant that after the government privatized the MOE labs, the new private labs were not required to contact the local Public Health Unit or the MOE if they found samples of tainted water. He said this lack of regulation of the private labs directly caused the crucial boil water advisory to be delayed by at least two days.

This most recent report was produced by OPSEU's Strategic Planning and Policy Development unit with support from the "Renewal of the MOE" Project Team, a group of OPSEU members in the MOE working to create a new Ministry capable of meeting the demands of protecting the environment and human health.

As a party with standing at the Inquiry, OPSEU provided evidence and documents and submitted ten reports to O'Connor. Our submissions are directly reflected in the judge's findings.