

Globe British Columbia

E. COLI OUTBREAK

White Rock rejects chlorination

'People come here because of our water, and we would like for it to remain the same - without chlorine,' mayor says

BY MARTEN YOUSSEF VANCOUVER

Six days of boiling water in an E. coli outbreak has not been enough to persuade White Rock's mayor that the city should turn to chlorination.

Mayor Catherine Ferguson said residents have a long history of resisting chlorine in their water. "The residents love the way our water tastes. It doesn't smell like chlorine and there has been discussion that chlorine has risks to it," Ms. Ferguson said.

Although major cities across Canada put chlorine in their water, and most of the Lower Mainland does it, White Rock has had no appetite to shift. Ms. Ferguson said opposition to chlorination is due to possible health risks and potential costs.

"People come here because of our water, and we would like for it to remain the same - without chlorine," said Ms. Ferguson, who declined to discuss how much it would cost to chlorinate the city's water.

Officials issued a boil-water advisory for the city south of Vancouver on Friday after a test came back positive for both E. coli and coliform. The town's water reservoirs have been owned and operated by Epcor since 2005, and much of Tuesday was spent emptying the infected 1.2-million-litre reservoir.

"Following that, we will send investigators to discover what could have caused this contamination," said David Rector from Epcor.

The reservoir was due to be cleaned in April of 2011 as part of the three-year maintenance cycle. Epcor's investigators had not discovered a cause by Tuesday evening, and the Fraser Health Authority said it would require three clean consecutive samples every day for three days before the water-boiling advisory can be lifted.

No illnesses have been reported in White Rock since Friday. Seven people died in Walkerton, Ont., when E. coli was found in the water supply in May of 2000.

SEE 'WATER' PAGE 3



Norma Jackson pours a glass of water from a pot she boiled earlier that day at her home in White Rock, B.C., on Tuesday. Residents have been told to boil their water after E. coli bacteria was detected in the city's water supply. DARRYL DYCK FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Elderly particularly vulnerable from E. coli

Officials of the Semiahmoo First Nations reserve in White Rock, which was included in the boil advisory, say their water system is in bad shape.

"We have been on a permanent water advisory since 2005," said Joanne Charles, a councillor on the reserve. "Our infrastructure is too old and needs to be replaced." The reserve's water supply falls under the management of the federal government and not the City of White Rock. Although the reserve is relying on chlorination, Ms. Charles said, "It's the infrastructure that is the real prevention."

Of the estimated 20,000 White Rock residents being affected by E. coli water contamination, the elderly are the most vulnerable, the owner of

a retirement home said. "It is obviously a big inconvenience for us," said Wes Colby, owner of Home Instead Senior Care in White Rock.

"Where we have some clients with dementia and short-term memory problems, we really have to inform them regularly not to drink or brush their teeth with tap water," Mr. Colby added. In addition to the logistical and financial challenge of buying bottled water and boiling the water, Mr. Colby said, staff is dealing with anxiety among the residents.

Save on Foods and Buy Low Foods in White Rock said their sales of bottled water have increased dramatically, but there is no shortage.

Restaurants along the usually teeming White Rock beach



We have been on a permanent water advisory since 2005. Our infrastructure is too old and needs to be replaced.

Joanne Charles, councillor, Semiahmoo First Nations reserve

strip say the number of diners have decreased as a result of the contamination.

"People are a little skeptical about coming down because they are not sure if everything has been sanitized," said George Zambus, one of the owners of the Greek restaurant Cosmos. The water contamination has forced restaurants in White Rock to wash food with bottled water, refrain from using pop machines and buy ice from outside of White Rock.

Vancouver's On the Rocks ice distributing company said at least four restaurants in White Rock are now using their ice. "We never sold in White Rock before and we have four restaurants as of this morning," saleswoman Jennifer Traylor said.