



Media Release

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False alarm proved public well protected Official says confidence in drinking water should be high

St. Thomas, Ontario, August 26, 2010 – Last week’s Boil Water Order was put into effect and withdrawn according to protocols created to ensure the highest degree of public safety, Laura McLachlin, Director, Health Protection Department with Elgin St. Thomas Public Health said Wednesday.

“Despite a mix-up of samples at a private lab that made local officials believe drinking water was contaminated with E. coli, everything that happened demonstrated that the public is well served by the health unit and the operators of the water system”, said McLachlin.

“These protocols are created to ensure the highest degree of public safety before a Boil Water Order is put in place and to ensure it is not removed prematurely.”

The Boil Water Order was put into effect about 7:00 p.m. last Thursday, about two and a half hours after public health was first informed by the lab and the St. Thomas water system operator that tests showed the presence of E. coli in a drinking water sample.

“This is a fast turn-around because of the many pieces of the puzzle that have to be put together,” said McLachlin.

Before a Boil Water Order is given, public health must investigate whether the adverse incident affects a street, a block, a subdivision, the whole city, multiple municipalities, or beyond. Clear boundaries of the affected area must be established.

“There are risks involved in issuing a Boil Water Order so we don’t issue them without doing a series of checks. The disruption of the water supply can interfere with safe food handling, hygiene, and preparation of medications. The risk of dehydration in hot weather is also a concern. The consequences for businesses that have to destroy product or shut down are significant as well” McLachlin said.

Without being able to isolate the source of the bacteria or pinpoint a specific area, health officials concluded that they had no choice but to act. Dr. Frank Warsh, Acting Medical Officer of Health issued the Boil Water Order.

On Friday, August 20th, the lab officially informed public health that an error had been made. The contaminated sample had not come from a water line currently supplying drinking water to the municipalities. Dr. Warsh, with the lab's written report in hand, reviewed further results of re-sampling and rescinded the Boil Water Order and notified the three affected municipalities.

The drinking water is safe and this process provides a great opportunity to verify if all the processes in place worked at their very best. Public health has completed an internal debriefing with health protection staff this week. Public health is looking forward to a debriefing session with its partners to review the actions taken in this situation and to learn from each other to be even more ready for any future incidents of this nature.

Elgin St. Thomas Public Health wishes to thank the residents and businesses for their patience until officials could confirm that the drinking water was safe.



Questions & Answers

The recent Boil Water Order raised a number of questions in the community. Elgin St. Thomas Public Health thought it would be helpful to address some of the questions for those who have not had the opportunity to speak with staff directly.

Q. *Why did ESTPH take 2-1/2 hours to issue a boil water order from the time it first was notified there was a problem?*

A. Elgin St. Thomas Public Health does not take a report and issue a Boil Water Order instantly. It is the health unit's responsibility and it is protocol to conduct a risk assessment – basically research the problem – to ensure public health is acting in the best interest of the public. A Boil Water Order presents risks and challenges so public health wants to be absolutely sure of the facts.

Q. *So what was involved in your risk assessment last week?*

A. Public health needed to determine all of the knowns and the unknowns.

To do this, public health:

- Reviewed reports from hospitals and doctors' offices to see if anyone had reported sickness potentially due to E. coli infection.
- Reviewed all potential sources of contamination in the water system, such as a line break construction accident, insects, tampering.
- Screened backgrounds of technicians involved in water sampling to determine the amount of training of the water sampling staff.
- Checked test results of the primary water line from Lake Erie for E. coli.
- Conferred with municipalities for history of sampling from that location.
- Determined whether contamination was found downstream.
- Assessed chlorine levels.
- Sought information from the system operator (City of St. Thomas) about the boundaries of the system.

Q. *What did all that checking do?*

A. In the end, the risk assessment could not guarantee that the water system was safe to drink. Elgin St. Thomas Public Health's only choice based upon the information collected and in accordance with legislation, was to err on the side of safety and issue

a Boil Water Order that covered St. Thomas, portions of Central Elgin and portions of Southwold.

Q. For both the Boil Water Order and the rescinding of the advisory, the health unit did not issue a statement to inform the public. Why not?

A. The role of the Health Unit is to issue a Boil Water Order to the operator of the water system, and to issue a Boil Water Advisory to the operator of the system. The Health Unit is not responsible for notifying the users of the drinking water system. That remains the responsibility of the water system operator working for the municipality. Public Health's duty when alerted to a problem is to conduct a risk assessment, issue a Boil Water Order if required and inform the water system operator. In this case, public health did that and then assisted the operators of the system where needed. For example, the health unit had public health staff advising high risk users that a Boil Water Advisory was coming. These high risk organizations include hospitals, restaurants, long term care facilities, pharmacies, day cares, EMS services, etc.

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