

Carrying the Water Forward Toolkit:

Practical Water Management
in-community and households



February 2026

Native Women's Association of Canada

Acknowledgement

The Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC) is a national Indigenous advocacy organization representing the political voices of Indigenous women, in all their diversities, in Canada. NWAC advocates for and works with Métis, Inuit and First Nations – on- and off-reserve, status, and non-status, disenfranchised – across Canada. NWAC works to enhance, promote and foster the social, economic, cultural, and political well-being of Indigenous women, in all their diversities, within their respective communities and Canadian society.

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Introduction

Water has always been a living relative, one who carries us through every stage of life. Over the 6 years (2020-2026) of this Water Carriers Project funded by Indigenous Services Canada (ISC), Indigenous women in all their diversity have shared both their sacred relationship with water and the realities of ongoing water insecurity. Long-term advisories, drought, contamination, aging infrastructure, and climate-driven changes continue to affect communities across the country. These challenges shape daily routines, health, caregiving responsibilities, and spiritual well-being.

Indigenous women hold a unique place within such water emergencies; not only as water carriers but also as the ones who carry some of the heaviest responsibilities. When water becomes unsafe, it is Indigenous women who are expected to maintain clean water for their families, care for vulnerable relatives, and make immediate decision to protect their families' health and safety. At the same time, they face economic strain and emotional weight of watching their waters become harder to uphold.



1. Goal of Toolkit

This toolkit was made specifically for Indigenous women in all their diversity who are navigating water insecurity. It blends practical guidance, including modern water monitoring techniques, with Traditional Knowledge and teachings that can be shared in written format. Whether someone is facing a water advisory, noticing changes in the land, or navigating the emotional and spiritual impacts of a water-related crisis, this toolkit provides guidance grounded in the lived realities of water insecurity.

To support ease of use during uncertain moments, the Carrying the Water Forward toolkit is organized into five sections: understanding water insecurity; Traditional Knowledge and teachings; practical water monitoring and safety steps; community response and coordination; and moving forward after disruption. Each section is designed to empower Indigenous women in all their diversity as leaders in water protection.



2. Understanding Water Insecurity

Water insecurity means not having consistent access to safe, clean, and reliable water for drinking, cooking, sanitation, cultural practices, and overall well-being. It can include contamination, shortages, infrastructure breakdowns, or advisories that restrict how water can be used. It also includes the social and systemic barriers that prevent communities from exercising control over their water systems.

Across the Water Carriers Project, Indigenous women have described how water insecurity rarely stem from a single cause, instead, they arise from layered and compounding pressures on the land, the water table, and community infrastructure. Contamination from major industry projects, outdated or inadequate water systems, drought, low water tables, and climate-driven changes all contribute to situations where water becomes unsafe to drink, cook with, or use for ceremony.

Findings from NWAC's [2025 National Water Carriers Survey](#) highlight the scale of these challenges. **Half of respondents reported not having reliable access to clean water for seven days a week, 27% of which reported access for only 1-3 days per week.** Additionally, **43% of respondents were currently under a boil water advisory, 28% under a do-not-consume advisory, and 15% under a do-not-use advisory.**^[1] Forcing households to either ration or purchase alternative water sources, which can cause financial and emotional strains on already burdened community members.

These events can be sudden, but more often they are slowly escalated issues, shaped by environmental shifts that communities have been observing for generations.

[1] **Boil water advisory:** A public health notice advising people to boil tap water for at least one minute before drinking, cooking, or brushing teeth, due to possible contamination.; **Do-not-consume advisory:** A warning that tap water should not be consumed at all—even if boiled—because it may contain harmful substances not removed by boiling.; **Do-not-use advisory:** The most serious advisory, indicating that tap water should not be used for any purpose—including drinking, cooking, bathing, or cleaning—because it poses serious health risks.



Water insecurity is not a failure of communities. Rather, it often reflects broader systemic conditions that have placed stress on both the land and local infrastructure, such as, underfunding, environmental disruption, and regulatory systems that do not adequately meet the needs of Indigenous communities.

NWAC's Water Carriers National Survey findings demonstrate such disparities across communities. While 84% of city residents reported daily access to clean water, **only 35% of those living on First Nations reserves reported the same. Residents of First Nations reserves, Inuit communities, and Métis settlements were far more likely to be under water advisories compared to those living in cities.** These statistics underscore the structural inequities that continue to shape water access.

Understanding the different causes of water insecurity helps communities identify what type of emergency they may be facing. Changes in taste, smell, or colour may signal contamination. Reduced water pressure or low river levels may point to supply issues. Repeated equipment malfunctions may indicate infrastructure breakdown. By recognizing these patterns early, Indigenous women in all their diversity can make informed decisions to protect households and community members.



3. Traditional Knowledge & Teachings to Guide Water Protection



Traditional Knowledge continues to guide how Indigenous women in all their diversity observe, understand, and respond to changes in water. It is crucial to not neglect these protocols when addressing water issues; not only to respect our living relative, water, but to also continue those practices which worked for our ancestors across thousands of years. What follows are some land-based, intergenerational teachings, and relational responsibility principles which can strengthen community preparedness and response during water insecurity.

This section is organized into three interconnected areas: **(1) observing natural indicators, (2) traditional filtration practices, and (3) cultural and decision-making principles that guide safe water stewardship.**

These themes were selected because they reflect practical knowledge that can be shared publicly in this format, applied during moments of water insecurity, and integrated alongside modern monitoring tools. Together, they demonstrate that Traditional Knowledge is not separate from emergency response, it strengthens it.



Traditional Knowledge & Teachings to Guide Water Protection



Observing Natural Indicators

Long before formal testing systems existed, communities relied on close observation of the land and water. Changes in sound, flow, clarity, and rhythm can signal shifts in water levels or environmental stress. A river running quieter than usual, irregular currents, or reduced movement may indicate blockages, drought, or upstream disruption.

Animal behaviour also provides important insight. Fish avoiding certain areas, birds refusing to land, insects disappearing, or wildlife seeking alternate water sources can signal contamination or temperature change. Seasonal patterns, including early freezes, late thaws, shrinking rivers, or prolonged dry soil – further indicate when water systems are under stress.

In many Nations, moon cycles are also understood to influence water movement and levels. Paying attention to moon phases helps predict when water may rise, recede, or shift, grounding decision-making in natural cycles. This knowledge remains an important tool for understanding water rhythms and planning accordingly to Mother Earth's seasons.



Traditional Knowledge & Teachings to Guide Water Protection

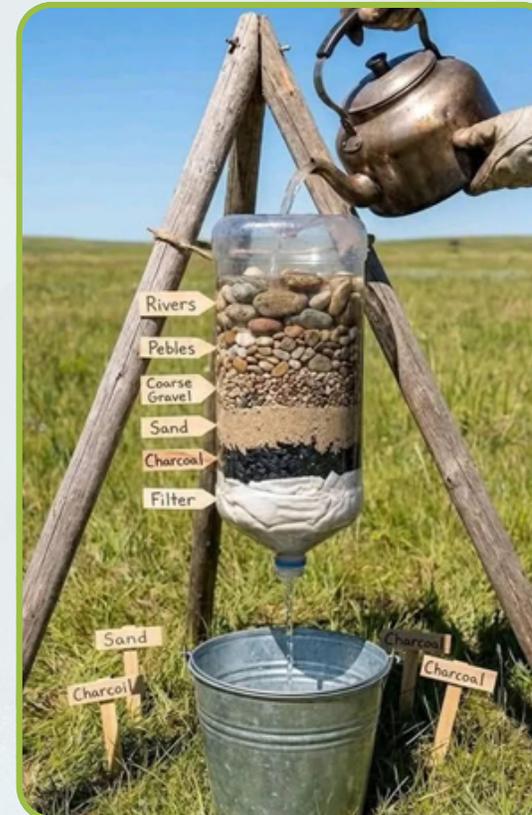


Traditional Filtration Practices

Mimicking the natural filtration processes of the land herself, layering materials such as clean sand, gravel, and charcoal has been used for generations to filter out sediment and improve water clarity. This method reflects an understanding that the earth already purifies water as it moves through soil and stone, and that these same principles can be applied in small-scale, emergency settings. In times of water insecurity, carefully layering these materials in a clean container can help remove visible debris and improve water appearance before boiling.

In some traditions, woven grasses, natural fibres, or birch bark have also been used as additional filtering layers to strain larger particles from collected water. These materials were gathered respectfully and used with intention, reflecting both practical knowledge and cultural relationship to the land.

Important: This traditional filtration method does not remove chemical contamination, heavy metals, or all harmful pathogens. It should only be used as a temporary, emergency measure and must always be followed by proper boiling and/or professional water testing. During confirmed contamination events or “do not consume/do not use” advisories, always follow official public health guidance.



This image demonstrates a layered emergency water filtration method using natural materials such as stones, sand, charcoal, and cloth. By mimicking the natural filtration processes of the land herself, these materials can help remove visible debris from collected water before boiling [2]

[2] WZ Creation. (2025, December 16). Homemade water filter for emergency use [Facebook group post]. Facebook. [This image demonstrates a layered emergency water filtration method using natural materials such as stones, sand, charcoal, and cloth. By mimicking the natural filtration processes of the land herself, these materials can help remove visible debris from collected water before boiling](#)



Traditional Knowledge & Teachings to Guide Water Protection



Cultural & Ceremonial Practices Supporting Water Safety

Intergenerational teachings emphasize respect for water, knowing that she carries spirit, memory, and teachings. From such an awareness, we must embody careful harvesting practices and responsibility to future generations of all our kinship relations who rely on water.

During times of water insecurity, such as boil-water advisories, contamination events, or low river levels, Traditional teachings across all Nations can guide practical choices by grounding our decisions in a holistic, Indigenous worldview, where we may act as caretakers to water. Take only what is needed, avoid disturbing already stressed water sources, and prioritize vulnerable members such as Elders, children, and those with compromised health. Expressing gratitude before collecting water reinforces the understanding that she is a living relative, thus encouraging mindful, careful handling during uncertain conditions.

Indigenous water governance is grounded in **respect**, **reciprocity**, and **relational responsibility** – between people, water, land, and future generations. Decisions made with respect and reciprocity emphasize giving back to the water that sustains life and honours our responsibilities to water over the rights of having it.

In practice, this means recognizing when water needs rest, when harvesting should pause, or when certain sources should be avoided until balance is restored. Rather than viewing water as a resource to extract regardless of condition, Indigenous worldviews encourage precaution during drought, contamination, or ecosystem disruption. When Traditional Knowledge is used alongside modern monitoring techniques such as testing, monitoring, and preserving, communities are better equipped to respond in ways that protect both immediate health and long-term ecological balance.



4. Practical Water Monitoring & Safety Steps



Water emergencies can feel overwhelming, especially when changes in colour, smell, or taste appear suddenly. During NWAC's Water Carriers workshops in Alberta (September 15-16, 2025) and Manitoba (September 10-11, 2025), Indigenous women in all their diversity were introduced to several ways to monitor water quality using both observation and basic tools.

In both Water Carriers workshops, participants engaged in hands-on exercises of water management, including testing strips, measuring pH changes, and analysing real-life scenarios such as waterway contaminations advisories and environmental degradation. Participants worked through practical exercises that included visually assessing sample water, interpreting colour changes on test strips, and discussing how to safely document and report concerns in a way that ensure data sovereignty. These workshops emphasized the capability of Indigenous women in all their diversity. When given the tools and training, they can lead in recognizing early warning signs and taking immediate steps within their households, communities, and Nations.

These techniques are not meant to replace Traditional practices, but to braid them together and help identify early warning signs that can guide immediate decisions. The methods below offer a practical starting point for Indigenous women who are responding to water concerns in real time. By combining clear observations with low-cost equipment, community members can better understand what may be happening in their water system and determine when to escalate concerns to local operators or health authorities.



Practical Water Monitoring & Safety Steps



Visual Checks (clarity, colour changes, sediment, odour)

Visual and smell-based checks are often the very first indicators that water may no longer be safe. (please provide examples of colours to provide tangible information) Cloudiness, unusual colours, oily film, rust sediment, or a strong metallic, sewage-like, or chemical odour can signal contamination, infrastructure failure, or changes in the water table. Observing these changes helps identify issues early and provides important information when reporting concerns to water operators. If any of these signs appear, the water should not be consumed until tested.

Safe Steps for At-Home Boiling or Filtering When Unsure

Boiling water is one of the most effective ways to kill pathogens during boil-water advisories or suspected contamination events. Bringing water to a full rolling boil for at least one minute makes it much safer to drink. Simple cloth or household filtration can be used when transferring boiled water to storage containers, and can help remove visible debris, but does not remove bacteria or chemicals. **(Filtration should always be paired with boiling unless otherwise instructed by authorities).**

Temperature Checks (unusual warmth or unexpected cold spots)

Water temperature naturally fluctuates, but sudden shifts such as consistently warm tap water or irregular cold spots in a waterway may indicate treatment malfunctions, groundwater shifts, or environmental impacts like drought. Regular temperature checks is a good practice to take up and can help identify when something has changed behind the scenes, even when the water looks normal.



5. Community Response: Who to Contact, What to Document, and How to Organize Quickly

When a water issue emerges – early coordination helps reduce confusion and protect vulnerable community members. The steps below provide a structured approach for Indigenous women in all their diversity who are often managing household safety and supporting others during emergencies.

The following recommendations are informed by NWAC's Water Carriers workshops and national engagement findings (2020-2026). They reflect practical strategies shared by Indigenous women and community leaders who have navigated water advisories and infrastructure disruptions. While every community has its own protocols and governance structures, these steps are offered as a supportive guide that can be adapted to local context.





Immediate Steps

- Stop using the water for drinking or cooking if contamination is suspected and no official confirmation has been issued.
- Check for official notices from band offices, municipal offices, water operators, or health authorities.
- Contact your local water operator or band administration to report unusual changes (colour, smell, sediment, loss of pressure).
- Notify Elders, households with young children, and those without internet access to ensure information reaches those most at risk.



Document What You Observe

- Record the date and time changes were first noticed.
- Note specific details: colour, odour, taste, sediment, water pressure, or temperature shifts.
- Take photos if visible contamination is present.
- Keep results from any home testing strips or tools used.





Connect with Appropriate Supports

- Stop using the water for drinking or cooking if Contact your local health authority or environmental health officer if illness is suspected.
- Reach out to community leadership if broader coordination is needed.
- Follow official boil-water advisory instructions carefully.
- Share information only from verified sources to prevent misinformation.



Organize Within the Community

- Identify who needs immediate assistance (Elders, pregnant individuals, those with disabilities or limited mobility).
- Coordinate water pickup, delivery, or shared transportation if bottled water distribution is required.
- Establish a clear communication method (phone tree, community radio, messaging group) to provide updates.



These steps are designed to be practical and adaptable.

They can help households organize their response in the first hours of uncertainty, strengthen communication between families and leadership, and create clear documentation that supports water operators and health authorities in resolving the issue more quickly.

By taking structured action, Indigenous women in all their diversity can help reduce panic, protect those most vulnerable, and support coordinated community response.



6. Moving Forward: Strengthening Water Security After Disruption

When a water advisory or contamination is resolved, the work does not stop. Recovery is an opportunity to strengthen systems, rebuild confidence, and prepare for future challenges. For Indigenous women in all their diversity, this means carrying forward both practical lessons and cultural responsibilities tied to water protection.

The following steps are drawn from NWAC's Water Carriers workshops and engagements where Indigenous women shared what helped them navigate advisories and infrastructure disruptions. These recommendations reflect lived experience that participants identified as strengthening long-term preparedness.

After a crisis, communities can take simple steps to build resilience:

- Restock water testing strips, filters, and emergency supplies used during the emergency.
- Establish a stored water system, including cleaning and rotation protocols to ensure freshness and safety at any moment.
- Review what worked well in communication and what areas require attention.
- Update contact lists for water operators, health authorities, and community leadership.
- Document lessons learned to support future response planning.



Closing

Strengthening water security also means revitalizing land-based knowledge and ceremony.

Hosting teachings, engaging youth in monitoring practices, and creating space for community reflection supports both healing and preparedness. When Traditional Knowledge is practiced alongside modern testing tools, communities embody a Two-Eyed Seeing approach: drawing strength from both Indigenous teachings and modern technology.

The Water Carriers project findings demonstrated that when Indigenous women in all their diversity are equipped with hands-on monitoring skills and supported in their cultural leadership, community confidence grows. This toolkit builds on that foundation. Its purpose is not only to respond to emergencies, but to support preparedness, strengthen Indigenous women's leadership, and ensure that water protection remains self-determined, Indigenous led.

Water thrives when traditional teachings and modern techniques work together. By carrying both forward, we will be better prepared to face future challenges and offer flowing water for generations to come.

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Resources:

First Nations Health Authority (FNHA)

Advisory guidance and health information.

<https://www.fnha.ca/what-we-do/environmental-health/drinking-water-advisories>

First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC)

OCAP® Principles

<https://fnigc.ca/ocap-training/>

First Nations Water Authority (FNWA)

<https://fnwa.ca>

Get Prepared Canada

Household water storage and emergency preparedness guidance.

<https://www.getprepared.gc.ca>

Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)

Current drinking water advisories in First Nations communities.

<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1614387410146/1614387435325>

Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)

Information on monitoring programs in First Nations communities.

<https://www.sac-isc.gc.ca/eng/1100100034879/1521124927588>

Indigenous Water Partnership (Our Living Waters)

https://ourlivingwaters.ca/indigenous_water_partnership/

Native Women's Association of Canada (NWAC)

Water Carriers Project

<https://nwac.ca/academics-policy/policy-development/environment/water-carriers/>

Two-Eyed Seeing – Mi'kmaw Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall (Cape Breton University)

<https://www.cbu.ca/indigenous-affairs/etuaptmumk-two-eyed-seeing/>

World Health Organization (WHO)

International standards for safe drinking water.

<https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241548427>



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