



THE VALUE OF WATER

By Denny Ross-Smith, Small Water Users Association of BC

We sometimes hear the phrase ‘the value of water,’ usually from government officials concerned that not enough is being done to upgrade water treatment and distribution infrastructure, implying that customers should be willing to pay more for the delivery of potable water. But, what does the ‘value of water’ really mean? Let’s look at a few examples.

For the most part, municipalities and regional districts deliver safe, potable water to their customers. However, the cost of effective treatment and other infrastructure is spread over a large population base and is usually amortized over many years, enabling annual water rates to be kept quite reasonable. Furthermore, municipalities and regional districts are eligible for government grants of up to two thirds of the cost of such infrastructure, thereby further reducing costs to their users. Generally speaking, the residents of these larger communities expect to receive potable water as a government service, and, accordingly, are willing to pay the associated costs, particularly since these costs are rarely exorbitant.

Unless there has been a major outbreak of waterborne illness in their community, it is unlikely that members of the general public have given much thought to the ‘value of water.’ Where such outbreaks have occurred, the residents may have a better appreciation of the risks associated with drinking water, and thus may place a higher ‘value’ in terms of what they are prepared to pay in order to avoid similar outbreaks in the future. The residents of Walkerton, Ontario, for example, would likely have no quarrel with this concept.

However, rural residents may have an entirely different perspective regarding the ‘value of water.’ To use one example, many small rural water systems in British Columbia supply untreated surface water, i.e., with no filtration or disinfection. Such systems will be placed on a boil water advisory by their regional health authority. Often, however, the majority of the residents on these systems consider

their water to be perfectly fit to drink, and believe (rightly or wrongly) that neither they nor any of their family members have ever been ill from drinking the water.

Since the cost of maintaining such systems is minimal, user fees are extremely low, often less than \$100 per year. To them, this *is* the 'value of water,' and, until they can be convinced of the risks of waterborne illness, most will be reluctant to pay for any new large investment in water treatment infrastructure. Furthermore, the majority of such systems have no means of arranging long-term financing and are ineligible for government grants. Consequently, all of the costs to install required treatment facilities must be paid up front, and, lacking advantages of scale, these costs can be extremely high for very small systems. In many cases, they are simply unaffordable for lower income residents.

Faced with this dilemma, the users on many small systems have resisted efforts by the government to bring them into compliance with the *Drinking Water Protection Act and Regulation*. The present inequitable situation regarding government financial support in British Columbia, while still expecting even the smallest private water systems to fully comply with the drinking water legislation, needs to be re-examined and addressed. The risks involved with untreated or improperly treated drinking water are real, although often difficult to quantify, and, therefore, difficult to correlate with the 'value of water.' A scarcity of water due to drought or an interruption of supply, for example, will likely have a far greater impact in the public mind, and more readily bring home the 'value of water,' than any general concern about potential health risks.

Water may indeed be our most valuable natural resource, but it is time that governments stop talking about the 'value of water' and pay more attention to the real issues involved with the provision of potable water in rural communities. With a better public understanding of the risks involved with the consumption of untreated water, and with reasonable access to grants and long-term financing, most small water systems in British Columbia would be better able and, therefore, motivated to take action to achieve the required standards for the supply of potable water. 💧



Piteau Associates Engineering Ltd.

Hydrogeological Assessments for

- Groundwater Supply
- Sewage Effluent Disposal
- Contaminated Sites
- Landfills
- Stormwater Infiltration
- Geothermal

215 - 260 West Esplanade Ave. • North Vancouver, BC V7M 3G7
 Phone: (604) 986-8551 • Fax: (604) 985-7286 • www.piteau.com

To do the job right, you need the right help.

Let Robins Flotech advise and select the most appropriate equipment to best suit your system, providing optimum performance at the most economical price and best delivery.

We'll get the job done right. The first time.

Robins Flotech Ltd.
 110-19188 94 Avenue
 Surrey, BC Canada, VAN 4X8
 Phone: (604) 882-0028
 Fax: (604) 882-0128
www.robinsflotech.com

Logos include: VAL-MATIC, Sinter Valve, KEYSTONE, AVR, CRANE, ITT, POSI-SEAL, VELAN, rotork, Field, EL-O-MATIC, ROSEMOUNT, mobrey, Sealmetrics, MCKINSTER, ASCO, TOPWORK, WESTLOCK.

EMPAC ENGINEERING LTD.

Formerly EMCO Engineering Ltd.

With offices across Southern British Columbia, Empac offers a full range of electrical consulting services including:

- SCADA
- electrical controls
- pumping stations
- treatment plants
- substations
- distribution
- prime power
- standby power
- street lighting
- traffic signals

1402 Columbia Ave
 Castlegar, BC V1N 3K3

www.empac.ca

Bus: 250-365-8455
 Fax: 250-365-6414