

ORAL QUESTION—KEVIN O'REILLY, MLA FRAME LAKE

QUESTION 307-19(2): Reduced Water Monitoring in Alberta during Pandemic

June 9, 2020

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, monsieur le President. My questions are for the Minister of Environment and Natural Resources. There have been public reports that the Alberta provincial government and the Alberta energy regulator have unilaterally decided to reduce water monitoring as a result of the pandemic. The quality and quantity of waters flowing into the NWT from Alberta are supposed to be protected by a Transboundary Water Agreement. Can the Minister confirm whether he has received any notice of reductions in water monitoring from Alberta under the Transboundary Water Agreement? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Member for Frame Lake. Minister of Environment and Natural Resources.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The GNWT was notified of a temporary suspension on March 30th by the Alberta government and the federal government. As well, at the end of April, the Alberta government had reached out to us. On June 1st, the bilateral management committee had a meeting and representatives of Alberta provided an update. We have also received correspondence from the Alberta government on monitoring as of June 3rd. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that information. We were actually given notice almost two months ago, more than two months ago. Can the Minister explain what kind of reductions in water monitoring have taken place in Alberta and what their impacts are on the Northwest Territories?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: Both Environment and Climate Change Canada and Alberta Environment and Parks temporarily suspended long-term quality monitoring across the province as a result of public health and safety concerns related to COVID-19. The suspension includes long-term monitoring on the Slave, Athabasca, and Peace Rivers. It also includes sites on the Athabasca River and its tributaries, which are part of the Oil Sands Monitoring Program. All compliance monitoring is still occurring.

On June 3rd, Alberta Environment and Parks indicated that it has been requiring PPE and developing a protocol to resume routine water quality monitoring in June. Currently, Environment and Climate Change Canada has not indicated when federal government water quality will resume.

MR. O'REILLY: I want to thank the Minister for that. I don't think that was actually good news for us, being downstream of Alberta. Can the Minister, though, tell us what action he has taken to protect NWT waters and residents from the reduced water monitoring in Alberta?

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: In response to concerns about flooding in Fort McMurray in late April, ENR began collecting water samples from the Slave River twice per week from the town of Fort Smith water treatment facility on May 1, 2020. ENR plans to continue this monitoring until mid-June 2020. These water quality samples are being analyzed for nutrients, salts, metal, hydrocarbons, and bacteria. This monitoring has not identified any concerns with water quality in the Slave River to date. ENR staff have completed a prior risk assessment to ensure that annual transboundary water quality samples for the Slave and Hay Rivers can occur this summer safely to reduce the risk of spread of COVID-19. ENR will reach out to the communities regarding proposed monitoring and research activities in their area when COVID-19-related risks can be addressed.

MR. SPEAKER: Thank you, Minister. Oral questions. Final supplementary, Member for Frame Lake.

MR. O'REILLY: Merci, Monsieur le President. I want to thank the Minister for that. It's great that we've increased our monitoring while Alberta continues to reduce theirs, and that there is some kind of risk assessments that our staff have done. It would be great to see that. Can the Minister, though, tell us whether he has taken some serious action, like invoking the dispute resolution provisions in the Transboundary Water Agreement with Alberta, and, if he hasn't invoked the dispute resolution process, why hasn't he done that? Mahsi, Mr. Speaker.

HON. SHANE THOMPSON: The GNWT has not, I repeat has not, invoked the dispute resolution provisions of the agreement. Instead, NWT interests on prioritizing transboundary monitoring has been communicated at technical ADM, DM, and ministerial levels directly and through the Bilateral Management Committee. The agreement provides for either government to implement urgent activities that are necessary to protect public health or public safety without delay. The agreement requires that data and information be shared and consultation commences as soon as possible. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.