

Jessica Darmanin, the Hamilton Spectator
Local - Panel's task: keeping our drinking water safe

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Doug Cuthbert figures it will take \$7.6 million to come up with a plan to be sure nothing like the Walkerton water tragedy ever happens in Halton or Hamilton.

As chair of a new drinking water source protection panel mandated by Ontario's post-Walkerton Clean Water Act, Cuthbert is in charge of ensuring clean, safe water is available in sufficient quantity for municipal distribution systems in watersheds overseen by Conservation Halton and the Hamilton Conservation Authority.

Two failures led to at least seven people dying and 2,500 becoming ill in Walkerton eight years ago. First, farm runoff contaminated a municipal well, then treatment plant operators failed to act on test results showing the water was unsafe.

Cuthbert calls municipal treatment plants the second defence barrier for water users, and sees little risk here of the negligence displayed in Walkerton.

But he says it's also important to protect raw water feeding intake pipes in Lake Ontario and the underground aquifers supplying municipal well systems serving Greensville, Freelon, Milton, Carlisle and Campbellville.

That's the job of the 16-member Halton-Hamilton Source Protection Committee he leads.

To explain its work and invite input on its terms of reference, the committee will hold formal public meetings in Dundas June 17 and Milton June 19.

It will also have a less-formal presence today at Christie Lake's Splash Day, where families can enjoy music and a variety of water-related activities.

Cuthbert, a water resources engineer and science manager retired from Environment Canada, says, "I've always wanted to be more involved in conservation authority activities and this is perfect -- a way to be engaged, to contribute and do something that's important."

While some observers think the committee should be responsible for private well water, Cuthbert says the province decided to get "the biggest bang for the buck" by dealing with municipal water, which in this area covers 80 to 90 per cent of the population. However, he noted that much of the scientific data the committee produces will also apply to private wells.

He doesn't see quantity as an issue for lake-supplied systems, even if climate change lowers the water level, but says with intake pipes all along the Greater Golden Horseshoe shoreline, pollution prevention is important.

When it comes to communities such as Carlisle, where the water storage tower isn't big

enough to meet peak summer demand, Cuthbert said the committee will have to find out whether the wells can supply enough -- a field where "the science isn't exact" -- and whether the groundwaterA06 is threatened by farm, industrial or urban land uses on the surface.

"We will be mapping intake protection zones and then looking for potential sources of contamination. The end result will not necessarily make homeowners and other landowners happy, because it has the potential for restricting land uses in vulnerable areas. The largest part of the Carlisle protection area, for example, is urban land, so what about nitrates in fertilizer people are using on their lawns? It has the potential to go back into the drinking water.

"It's no different from having a septic system and well on the same property. You can pollute your own water supply."

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To learn more

Formal public meetings: Tuesday, June 17 6 p.m., with presentations at 7 Dundas Lions Memorial Community Centre 10 Market St. S., Dundas Thursday, June 19 Conservation Halton Administrative Office 2596 Britannia Rd. W., Milton For information on the Clean Water Act, visit www.ontario.ca/cleanwater For information on the Halton-Hamilton Source Protection Region, visit www.protectingwater.ca Christie Lake's Splash Day Today 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Christie Lake Conservation Area 1000 Hwy. 5 West, Flamborough Admission is free. Play water games, join us at the new kids-only pond, take a bus tour of your local watershed, attend reptile and amphibian demonstrations and enjoy children's entertainment with Turkey Rhubarb and the Funky Mamas. For more information, contact Rebecca Hull, 1-905-854-9229, ext. 221; e-mail: rhull@hrca.on.ca

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