

# Canadian Opinion on Drinking Water in the Aftermath of Walkerton

THIS SPECIAL REPORT ON CANADIAN PUBLIC OPINION ON WATER ISSUES FOLLOWING THE TRAGIC CONTAMINATION OF MUNICIPAL WATER SUPPLIES IN WALKERTON, ONTARIO, IS BASED ON THE RESULTS OF A NATION-WIDE SURVEY OF 1775 RANDOMLY SELECTED CANADIANS. THE SURVEY WAS CONDUCTED BY TELEPHONE BETWEEN JUNE 13 AND JULY 15, 2000. RESULTS ARE CONSIDERED ACCURATE WITHIN 2.4 PERCENT, 19 TIMES IN 20.

## eFlash Report

### After Walkerton, concern about drinking water safety is up in Ontario, but national trends are unaffected.

Following the E. coli contamination of municipal water supplies in Walkerton, Ontario, Environics International asked Canadians to identify their greatest concern about water in their area. Up only marginally from 1995, four in ten (43%) in Canada say they are most concerned about the safety of their drinking water. Fewer Canadians respond that their top concern is the quality of water in nearby rivers, lakes, and oceans (28%). Fewer still point to the quality of underground water (13%), or potential water shortages (7%).

Drinking water safety has been a long-standing concern among Canadians. Since 1989, when Environics first polled this question, concern about drinking water safety has hovered around 40 percent. Following Walkerton, only a minor increase in this finding has occurred nationally.

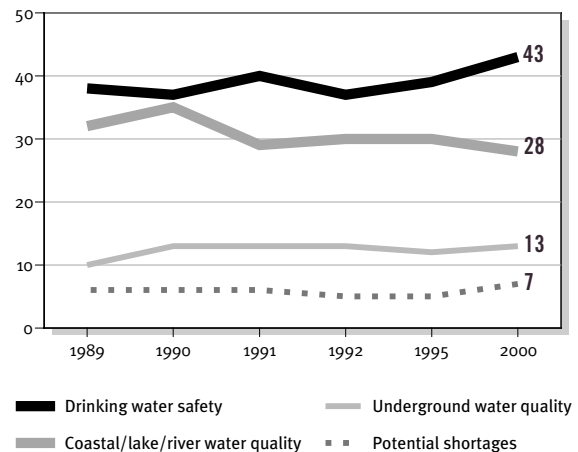
In Ontario, however, concern about water safety (50%) is up 11 points from 1995. Interestingly, concern about drinking water safety has increased as much in Toronto (54%) as it has in the small communities of rural Ontario (51%). Quebecers (34%), in contrast, are significantly less likely than others to point to drinking water safety as their top water concern.

### Quality ratings for tap water are up, and still better for rural areas than in large cities.

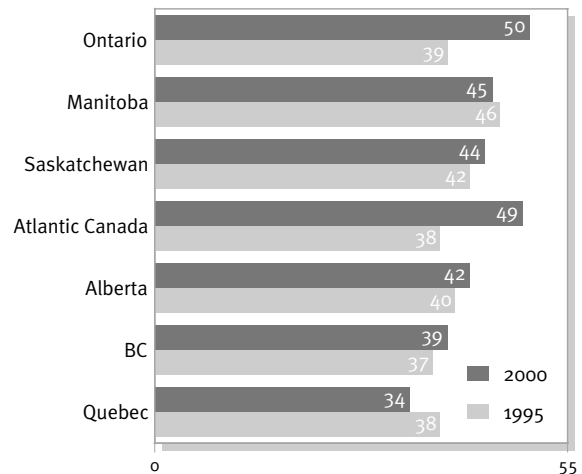
Asked to rate the quality of the tap water available in their area, Canadians are less likely than they were a decade ago to say "poor." In fact, the proportion of Canadians who rate the quality of their tap water as high (35%) has increased slightly since 1996. More than half (52%) describe their tap water as acceptable.

Despite increased concern about drinking water safety, residents of rural areas remain more likely than others to rate their tap water quality as high. Residents of Ontario's small towns are even more

#### Greatest Water Concern



#### Greatest Water Concern "Drinking Water Safety" by Region



likely than people in communities of similar size elsewhere in Canada to rate their tap water highly. Urban Canadians, especially those in Toronto and Montreal, are much less likely to do so.

Overall, Ontarians respond to this issue no differently than other Canadians. Following Walkerton, then, public perception of tap water quality has not been greatly altered from 1996, even in rural Ontario.

The perceived quality of water supplied by private wells appears to have remained high. Another key factor in the ongoing satisfaction with tap water is the explosive increase in the use of water filters and bottled water in households across the country.

## Part of a long-term trend, an increasing minority think of the food and agriculture industry as the worst polluter of water.

A plurality (38%) of Canadians continue to point to the chemical industry when asked which industry causes the most serious water pollution. An increasing minority (17%), however, believe the food and agriculture industry is the worst water polluter. Since 1992, the proportion of Canadians pointing to the food and agriculture industry has steadily increased by 13 points. Up only two points since 1998, the Walkerton crisis appears not to have provoked a major shift in blame to the agriculture sector.

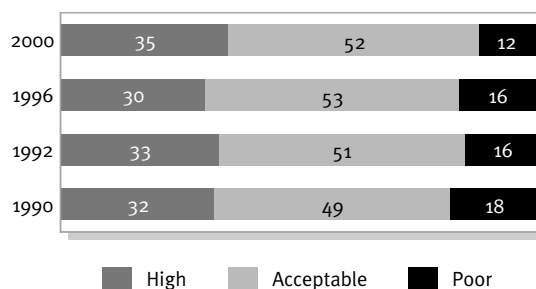
In Ontario, the proportion who think the food and agriculture industry is the worst water polluter is up five points since 1998, but Ontarians remain less likely than others to blame the agriculture sector.

## In the wake of Walkerton...

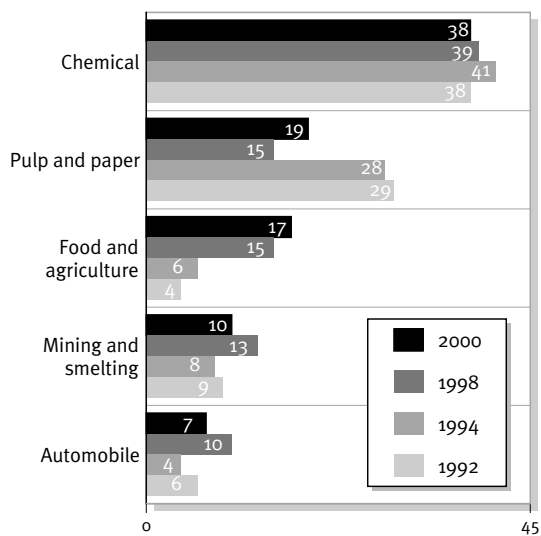
For the time being, the Walkerton water emergency has not occasioned a crisis in the Canadian public's confidence in their water. Compared to Environics' tracking data, the findings of this recent poll show few changes in concerns and beliefs about water polluting industries, drinking water quality, or safety. The changes that have occurred are local to Toronto and small-town Ontario, where concern about safety has increased, but not at the expense of overall perceptions of tap water quality.

Experience shows that incidents such as Walkerton have their greatest impact in the area of public trust. When confidence in governance is low, public anxieties develop and become manifested in widespread concern about specific issues, leading to public demands for action. According to Environics' most recent Focus Ontario survey, there has been a dramatic increase since March 2000 in the proportion of Ontarians that disapprove of their provincial government's handling of environmental issues, most likely a direct result of the Walkerton tragedy. It should be noted that this decline in confidence in the Ontario government's ability to protect the environment has not affected its overall performance rating.

## Rating Quality of Local Tap Water



## Worst Water-Polluting Industries



Environics International's Environmental Monitor research shows that the environmental performance ratings for Canadian governments, private industries, and even individuals have begun to fall sharply after a decade of improvement. The trend mirrors the dramatic decline in perceptions of governance that occurred at the end of the 1980s, leading to the last green wave. While Walkerton on its own will not bring about such a watershed, it has weakened public trust in environmental monitoring in a way that may contribute to the re-emergence of the environment as a top-of-mind issue in Canada.

Please note that in November 2003, Environics International became GlobeScan Incorporated. For more information on this press release please see our contact information at: [www.GlobeScan.com](http://www.GlobeScan.com)