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Interviewer: Jason Turnbull

Interviewee: Bethany Lipka

Jason Turnbull: Turning on the tap to get a drink of water, to brush your teeth or wash your face is something most of us take for granted. But in Northern Ontario there are at least 10 remote First Nations that don’t have that luxury. The new federal government has pledged to reduce boil water advisories in aboriginal communities. Bethany Lipka says on solution might be to help First Nations communities gain access to nearby municipally treated water supplies. She is a lecturer with the University of Guelph and has just published an article on the topic in the journal of Water Resources and Economics, and she is joining us by phone today, hello Bethany.

Bethany Lipka: Hello.

Jason Turnbull: So, uh, what got you interested in studying the relationship between First Nations communities and municipal water supplies.

Bethany Lipka: Um, well as you said the problem of boil water advisories in First Nations communities is a longstanding issue. And particularly in your region we have a lot of communities in Northern Ontario that have been under boil water advisory for, for years. For example Neskantaga First Nation, they have been under their boil water advisory for I think it’s been 20 years. So, and this has been an issue that has been getting increasing media attention in recent years, um and there was a program that’s actually currently administered by the federal government through the Canadian Federation of Municipalities and it’s something called the First Nation – Municipal Infrastructure Partnership Program. And this is essentially a program that is, um, seeking to help facilitate collaborative relationships between First Nations and municipalities with a particular emphasis on fostering water servicing agreements between First Nations and municipalities, so would be where a First Nation purchases treated water from a neighbouring municipality, um and there have been a number of claims that these collaborative agreements can have a positive impact on water quality in First Nations communities so we sort of sought to investigate empirically whether we could prove that there was in fact a positive relationship between these types of cooperative agreements and drinking water outcomes on reserves.

Jason Turnbull: When you’re talking about this, do you mean like the, literally like the pipe running from the municipal water supply to the First Nation? Is that how this would work?

Bethany Lipka: Uh, it would be either piped distribution or trucked distribution. So either a municipality extending its distribution network to the boundary of the reserve and the reserve then connecting to the municipal water system, or trucks delivering treated water from a municipal treatment facility to on-reserve households.

Jason Turnbull: So do you have any examples of how this could actually work, like is it happening anywhere?

Bethany Lipka: Actually, interestingly Sudbury has an agreement, uh they’ve had an agreement since 2003 with Whitefish Lake reserve, where Whitefish Lake’s distribution network has actually been connected to Sudbury, the City of Sudbury’s distribution network. So, um, ya it’s actually happening very close to home.

Jason Turnbull: I didn’t even know that.

Bethany Lipka: I wasn’t aware of that until I was prepping for our conversation today, I took a look at my data and found that example.

Jason Turnbull: And, and do you know if it’s been working well, I mean I’d assume if it’s been going on for the past while, is it going well?

Bethany Lipka: Ya it seems to have been renewed, uh since 2003, so it seems to be working successfully, um we assume generally when we see these types of agreements because they are voluntary and because both communities are entering in to them voluntarily that there must be the presence of mutual benefits in order for that to, to emerge.

Jason Turnbull: Now, Whitefish is relatively close to a major centre. Like, looking at our specific situation. When I’m thinking about some of these far north communities, they are not that close to a major city. So how comparable is that example?

Bethany Lipka: Ya, exactly. So, um, we recognize that these types of agreements are definitely not a sort of one-size-fits-all solution to this problem. There are a number of First Nations that are simply too remote for this type of agreement to be a feasible option for them. And we found in our analysis that proximity to a potential partner is obviously a key determining factor. Um, that said the average distance from a reserve to a neighbouring population centre in cases where this type of agreement emerged was about 33 kilometers. And there are a number of First Nations across the country and even just looking in Ontario alone that based on geographic proximity could potentially take advantage of this type of agreement. There seems to be room for more of these collaborative relationships to emerge.

Jason Turnbull: Out of the 10 in Ontario, that we’re dealing with, uh, right now, do you know how many would qualify into that?

Bethany Lipka: Um, I looked into it yesterday and about 4 or 5 fall within that range.

Jason Turnbull: Hmm. This example and talking about this, like, it’s almost like it’s such an easy solution, there must be more to it. Like there must be a reason why this hasn’t happened yet.

Bethany Lipka: Um, one really important factor which we weren’t really able to capture in our analysis because it’s hard to capture empirically is the element of trust. So these agreements require that there is a great deal of what we would call social capital or trust between First Nations and their potential partners in order for them to be feasible. And that can be a potential barrier if there are historic or contemporary tensions between communities, um, that could possibly be a factor that’s inhibiting more of these types of collaborative relationships from emerging.

Jason Turnbull: What about cost?

Bethany Lipka: Uh, that’s definitely another factor. The cost, even just the cost of negotiation can be substantial. So sitting down and actually negotiating the terms of these agreements, um, but that’s something that the Infrastructure Partnership Program that I mentioned earlier that the federal government is trying to sort of, uh, minimize those costs as much as possible. They provide things like agreement templates and toolkits to municipalities and First Nations to try to minimize that barrier as well. That’s also definitely a barrier.

Jason Turnbull: So Trudeau promised some action on this within 4 years. Um, and it’s apparently supposed to be very costly. Um so with the examples that we’re talking about today, like tapping into another system, can that potentially lead to some developments here I wonder?

Bethany Lipka: It could potentially be um a cost effective solution for many First Nations. That would definitely be something that would have to be determined on a case-by-case basis, there are so many factors at play. So, um, I don’t think that this is necessarily ‘the’ solution as I’ve said already, but it’s definitely I think an important potential tool we can have in our toolbox as we are moving ahead with trying to address this problem in the future.

Jason Turnbull: Have you spoken with any political leaders in northern Ontario about this idea?

Bethany Lipka: No, not as of yet, no.

Jason Turnbull: You may want to give them a call.

Bethany Lipka: Definitely.

Jason Turnbull: Uh, very interesting stuff. Thank you very much for your time today.

Bethany Lipka: Thank you.

Jason Turnbull: That’s Bethany Lipka, a Lecturer in the Department of Food, Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of Guelph. Her paper exploring the feasibility of First Nations communities buying municipally treated water is published in the current issue of the Journal of Water Resources and Economics.