

“We had all kinds of water”

NESKANTAGA FIRST NATION
HAS BEEN UNDER A BOIL WATER
ADVISORY FOR 30 YEARS. THE TRAUMA
OF AN ENTIRE GENERATION
WITHOUT ACCESS TO SAFE DRINKING
WATER HAS LEFT ITS MARK.

BY **BRANDI MORIN**
WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY **SARA HYLTON**

TRAILS OF DUST chase vehicles along gravel roads in Neskantaga First Nation on a sweltering mid-August morning. The northwestern Ontario community is alive with excitement. Its annual summer festival is underway, a vibrant week-long celebration featuring daily communal meals, contests with cash prizes, bingo games, music, dancing and a traditional fishing derby.

Derek Moonias, 48, drives his beat-up half-ton to the tiny airport 12 kilometres outside the townsite to collect a delivery of bottled water. His three-year-old grandson, Pearson, tags along. It's a commute Moonias, Neskantaga's water distribution coordinator, makes several times a week. Usually, he'd use his allocated cargo van, but it's stuck in a ditch waiting for a tow because he took a wrong turn the day before delivering water to a resident.

“I'm so tired mentally that I'm about to collapse,” says Moonias, who's responsible for distributing bottled water to about 300 people in around 80 households. But this week he's on double duty, placing extra orders to accommodate the celebration, plus volunteering where he's needed at the festival.

The celebration is a break for most, says Moonias. It's an opportunity for community members to shift their focus from crisis mode to hope. Because for the last 30 years this February, people in Neskantaga haven't been able to trust the water coming from their taps. The community is home to Canada's longest boil water advisory, in place since 1995. The predicament stems from aging infrastructure, contamination problems and a lack of adequate resources for maintenance and upgrades to the water treatment facility.

Although it's borne the longest burden, Neskantaga isn't alone in its water crisis. Dozens of First Nations in Canada do not have adequate access to clean and safe water, a fundamental human right declared by the United Nations General Assembly in 2010. Decades of inadequate investment in water infrastructure and treatment facilities — rooted in Canada's historical neglect of Indigenous communities and systemic racism stemming from the 1876 Indian Act — have left many First Nations communities with outdated or



non-functioning systems. According to the advocacy group The Council of Canadians, 73 per cent of First Nations water systems across the country are at medium or high risk of contamination.

Nestled along the banks of Attawapiskat Lake and the Otokwin River, 436 kilometres northeast of Thunder Bay, Ont., Neskantaga is accessible only by plane or winter road. The irony of the First Nation being situated along the shores of a lake and surrounded by a labyrinth of fresh water is palpable.

“Why can’t we be like any other cities or towns where we use tap water? When are we going to be normal like everybody else? We’re just bottle people. But we’re humans too,” laments Moonias.

As the water distribution coordinator, Moonias meticulously keeps track of each household, including how many people live there and how much water they need. He makes lists in a black pocketbook after querying door to door, then calls in or emails the water orders to a supplier in Thunder Bay. Throughout the week, Moonias picks up 25 or more boxes of various sizes of bottled water, paid for by the federal government, when the plane lands at the airport.

“We’re treated like garbage.” Moonias shakes his head while gesturing to his grandson in the back seat. He stops the truck and points to rashes on Pearson’s legs. Although the toddler’s only been back home in Neskantaga for a couple of weeks, Moonias says, he’s already reacting to bathing in

the tap water here, an issue echoed by other community members for which no one really has a definitive explanation. Since 2020, according to government testing, Neskantaga’s newly upgraded water treatment facility has been producing clean water.

Moonias has deep scars that are more than a decade old, along with fresh sores on his body that he says come from exposure to the tap water.

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He counts the bloodied wounds on his arms then removes his socks to show the scabby bottoms of his feet.

“I’m so embarrassed by these,” he says of his scars. “We’re not treated fairly. All we ask for is clean water.”

A COMMUTER AIRCRAFT touches down at Neskantaga’s small airport to drop off dozens of community members who don’t live on the reserve. They’ve flown home for the festival to reconnect with their families and culture. Passengers are lined up at a checkpoint set up behind plastic folding tables, while airport staff, supported by officers with the Nishnawbe Aski Police Service, search their luggage in an effort to prevent drugs and alcohol from entering the community. It’s a tribal policy enacted to

help protect members from further crises.

The persistent lack of clean water — what amounts to a generation never having drinkable water out of the taps — has exacerbated mental health issues and social problems in Neskantaga. The community, like many Indigenous communities across the country, lacks adequate housing, and overcrowding is an issue, with reports of two or three families living in one house. Now another epidemic affects the lives of residents here: suicide. The band declared a state of emergency in 2013 after several suicides and numerous attempted suicides by youth. Since then, more young people have been lost to suicide, drug overdoses and sudden death. The state of emergency has never been lifted.

Neskantaga First Nation (PREVIOUS and OPPOSITE). Derek Moonias (ABOVE) is responsible for delivering bottled water to about 300 community members.

Moonias drives to the graveyard, tucked away along a winding forest road a few kilometres from the reserve. Weathered headstones contrast with mounds of soil piled onto fresh graves bearing plastic flowers and framed photographs of deceased loved ones.

“Suicide ... suicide ... that whole row is suicide ... drug overdose.” Moonias points to rows of graves, many of whom are his relatives.

“This whole row here are my siblings, niece and nephews.... We have a lot of pain in this graveyard.”

Moonias has come through trials of his own, having spent five years in a federal prison for attempted murder and other charges following an incident in 2015. He'd barricaded himself in his home with a gun and shot it into the air when police arrived to check up on him.

He says the incident occurred after the deaths of two of his siblings and several other relatives, along with the resurfacing of sexual abuse he'd experienced as a child.

"I broke down. But prison was the best thing that happened in my life. I remember what the judge told me: 'Mr. Moonias, I see a broken soul. I see emptiness in you. No hope. If I gave you a second chance, would you take it?' And I told the judge I would do whatever I can to turn my life around."

While in prison, Moonias enrolled in a healing lodge program and began participating in sweat lodge ceremonies and addressing past trauma.

"When I got home, I got accepted back [into the community], and since then, I've dedicated my life to my reserve. I took my second chance: I'm sober, I'm drug free and I'm working for them. I do whatever I can for them."

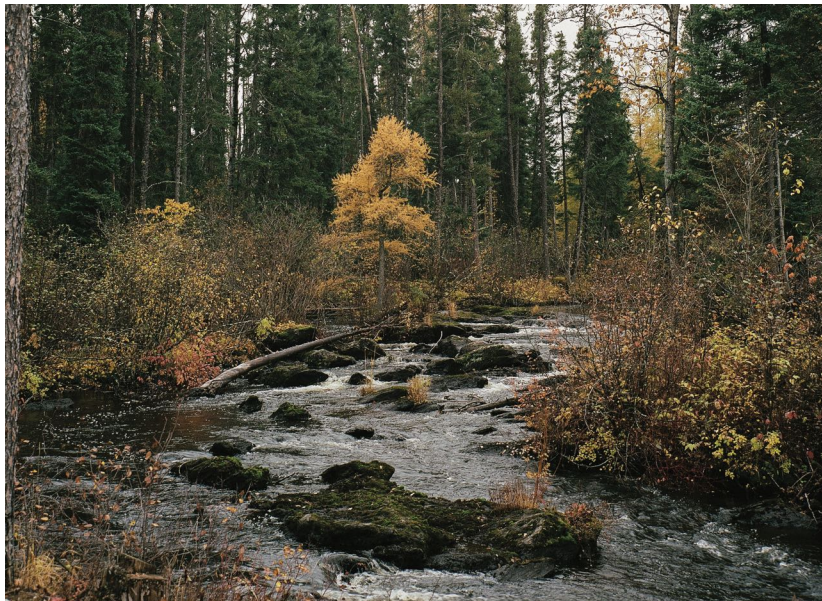
Moonias lights a cigarette and perches it next to the headstone of his late niece.

"She always used to tell me, 'Make sure you light up a cigarette by my grave.' I come and visit here a lot."

Looking around the cemetery, Moonias is heartbroken. He equates many of the deaths to the water crisis.

"A lot of them fought for water. And they gave up because they felt hopeless. My brother's here, too. He advocated for clean water, but he gave up because he felt like a failure."

His grandson inquisitively wanders through the rows. Moonias picks him up by a grave and whispers to him. "You miss uncle? Uncle is in another



place. We'll see him when our time is up. Right now we have to fight in this world."

AT THE LOCAL ELDERS FACILITY, 84-year-old Leo Moonias slowly rises from his worn armchair. His gnarled hands grip a battered walker as he shuffles toward the door. His small living space is dimly lit, with the flickering of his TV playing an old western turned up too loud.

Leo's weathered face is a map of the community's struggles; each line tells a story of resilience in the face

of hardship. His deep brown eyes are distant and reflective as he reminisces about growing up on the territory hunting, fishing and trapping with his parents and extended family. His adopted son Brad Moonias sits beside him in a wooden chair and translates questions for him into Anishinaabemowin.

It was a tough way of life, Leo responds in English, but they were nourished and strong.

"We had all kinds of water," he says, referring to freshwater sources they accessed, such as springs. "Wherever

Elder Leo Moonias (TOP LEFT) remembers when the community was relocated to the current townsite in the early 1990s. Before that, he says, they "had all kinds of water" (BOTTOM LEFT). A sign outside a home (BOTTOM RIGHT) speaks to their frustration.

you went [on the land], you saw good water," Leo gestures with his arms towards the river outside his window, eyes widened with enthusiasm. "And we were healthy too."

Historically, the people of Neskantaga lived on the lands and waters surrounding the Attawapiskat River. According to a 2019 lawsuit filed by Neskantaga First Nation and Curve Lake First Nation against Canada over their prolonged drinking water advisories, the federal government forced Neskantaga members to the settlement of Lansdowne House, 20 minutes east of the current townsite, in the 1950s in order for their children to attend mandatory day schools. There, if community members didn't get water from the land, they had to boil water from Attawapiskat Lake, where decomposing organic matter and other natural compounds cloud the water and make it unsuitable for drinking unless boiled. The Indian Affairs agency office and the Health Canada nursing station had clean drinking water available to federal personnel; community members were not allowed to access this water, according to the lawsuit.

Then, in the 1980s, due to persistent flooding and crumbling infrastructure, the community was uprooted from Lansdowne House to the current townsite. One of the incentives the federal government offered for the move, says Leo, was the promise of clean, running water in every home.

The relocation was mostly completed by the early 1990s, and the federal government, through what was then known as Indian Affairs,



funded the construction of a water treatment plant. It was a natural sand, slow-filter system drawing water from the lake. This type of water treatment system, while considered a relatively economical, safe and reliable system elsewhere, requires highly skilled operators and is often not appropriate for water sources with lots of sediment and high turbidity — water in Attawapiskat Lake is often yellow or brown and considered to have high turbidity. The system is also less effective at removing microorganisms from cold water — not suited

for the climate conditions in the northern Ontario community — and must be monitored and cleaned to ensure it is functioning properly. According to Neskantaga's lawsuit, this system was experimental and untested at the time. "Meanwhile, federal personnel stationed in Neskantaga were provided with a separate, fully functional clean water system," read their statement of claim.

Leo says he celebrated when Neskantaga first received running water. "I was really happy when the water was running at my place that time."

MAPS: THIS SPREAD AND NEXT: CHRIS BRACKLEY/CAN GEO. DATA FOR BOIL WATER ADVISORY MAP: INDIGENOUS SERVICES CANADA. OCTOBER, 2024. SAC15C.CC.CA/ENG/1620925418298/162092543679H



Clockwise from TOP LEFT: Derek Moonias sifts through bottled water flown in by the federal government; Moonias shows the sores he has developed, he says, from bathing in the tap water; Wilfred Sakanee, a water plant operator, fills a canister with water from a reverse osmosis system; Martin Anges boils water to bathe his newborn baby.

But the optimism was short-lived. A few months later, on February 1, 1995, it became clear that the new facility was failing to adequately disinfect the water. A boil water advisory was issued by the community

and the government. The water was also testing high for trihalomethanes, harmful by products of sodium hypochlorite disinfection that, with long-term exposure, have been linked to a higher risk of certain cancers.

A report conducted by the department following the system's failure cited design flaws and a lack of proper maintenance. The water still flowed from the taps, but it was the colour of ginger ale and could have contained any number of contaminants in addition to trihalomethanes, interfering "with everything from basic hygiene to Neskantaga's traditional cultural and spiritual practices,

which revolve around water," states the community's lawsuit.

In 2005, the government funded a temporary reverse-osmosis water treatment unit. While the slow-working unit located at the end of the community produced safe drinking water, it placed the community "lower on the priority list for water system upgrades," according to the lawsuit.

And so it stayed until 2017, when the federal government pledged to end all long-term drinking water advisories on public systems on reserves by March 2021. That year, it allocated \$8.8 million to build a new, state-of-the-art

conventional water treatment plant in Neskantaga. The plant was completed in 2019, after multiple delays and problems, and is far more complex to operate. Shortly after, that plant failed as well, because of a broken water pump. According to the government, it was back up and running and producing clean water in 2020. However, the chief and council decided to keep Neskantaga's boil water advisory in effect.

All these disruptions have had a cumulative impact. Over the years, the community's school has been periodically shut down due to a lack of running water, disrupting children's education. The entire community has been evacuated twice in the last five years over water safety concerns.

While the federal government has made progress recently, lifting 146 of Canada's long-term drinking water advisories since 2015, it hasn't provided a single, comprehensive estimate of when the advisories will be lifted or of the losses incurred by communities to fully address the drinking water crisis on all First Nation reserves. In 2023,

Indigenous Services Canada reported that the government had invested over \$5.6 billion since 2016 to support water and wastewater infrastructure on reserves. But a 2021 report by the

"Reconciliation IS JUST A FANCY WORD USED BY POLITICIANS TO THE MEDIA. THE WAY I SEE IT, we're not even there yet."

auditor general noted that despite these investments, "overall, Indigenous Services Canada did not provide the support necessary to ensure that First Nations have ongoing access to safe drinking water."

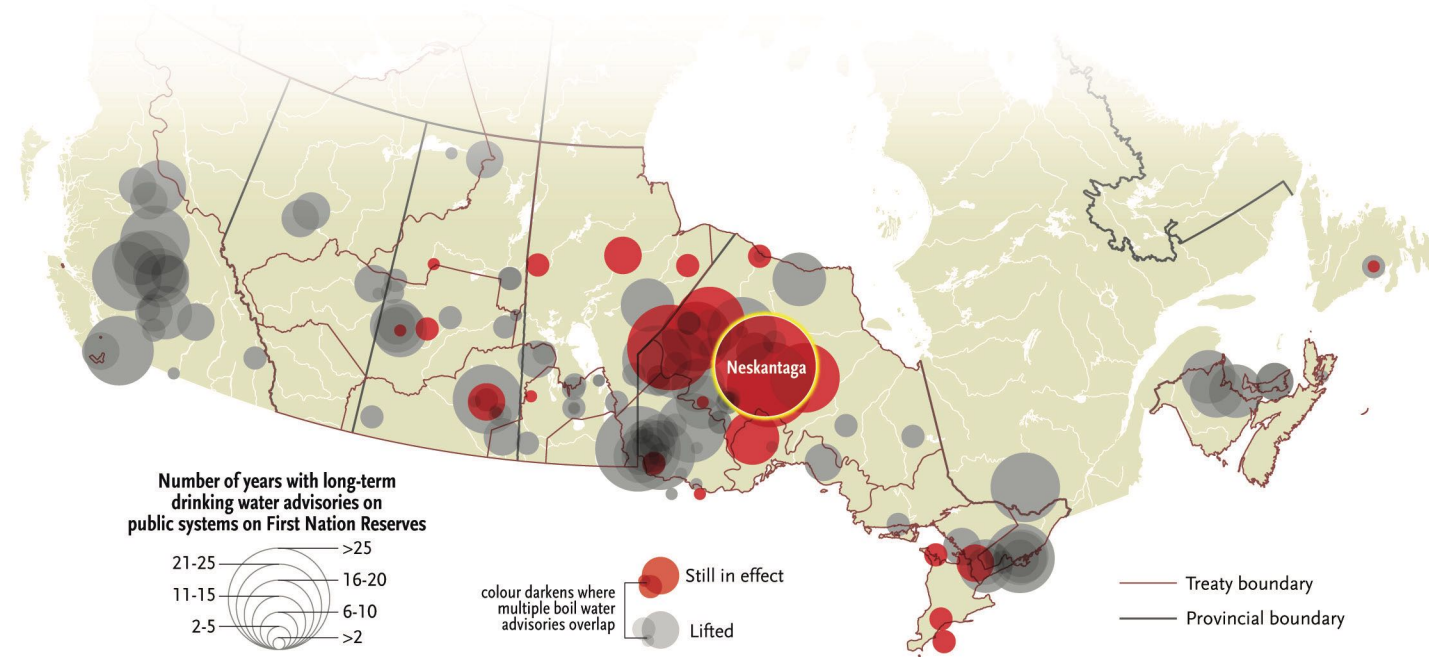
As of November 2024, there were still dozens of short-term boil water advisories across the country and 32 long-term advisories.

DOZENS OF FESTIVAL goers converge on a grassy field near the water, cheering on competitors of a shoe-throwing game. Marcus Moonias, 33, is sitting in his pickup truck near what community members call "the point" on the tip of the Attawapiskat Lake. The rugged shoreline is dotted with stunted spruce and cedar trees, their branches reaching out over the lake. A wooden dock juts out into the water, and a few aluminum boats are moored nearby.

"It's a beautiful community here. The people are great," he says. "But just like any reserve, life is hard. We don't have the access to services, education and health."

Marcus was the water treatment plant operator from 2017 to 2021. In October 2020, he discovered a suspicious looking sheen in the treatment facility's reservoir.

"I knew something wasn't right," he says. "So, I called the chief and told him. We didn't want to take any chances. He decided to make the call to evacuate everyone until they figured out what was wrong."





Chief Chris Moonias (LEFT) is fed up with living in a constant state of emergency. For many, like Landon Moonias (RIGHT), the ancestral way of life is vital. Amanda Moonias (BOTTOM RIGHT) delivers extra water to the home of a newborn baby.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 300 people, including Elders and children, were evacuated to hotels in Thunder Bay, where they stayed for two months. Despite the city's potable water, members of the community opted for bottled, Chief Chris Moonias told the CBC at the time. Ultimately, the CBC reported, it was mineral oil from a broken pump seal that caused the oily sheen; the pump was replaced.

But no one in Neskantaga ever really lets their guard down, says Marcus, who is also a former elected band councillor and father of three young daughters.

"Even when I go to Toronto or Thunder Bay, I don't drink water from the tap," he says. "It's programmed in my mind that my water is not safe."

"Why did it take so long [to get clean drinking water]?" posits Marcus. "Reconciliation is just a fancy word that politicians use in the media. The way I see things is: we're not even there yet... until we see high schools up north, a proper health centre, more houses. We have 100 people in a backlog that want to return [to Neskantaga], but we're at

capacity because of our hydro plant, we don't have lots, and it costs about a million dollars to build a house here anyways."

For many residents, one thing that remains intact is the connection with their ancestral way of life.

"I just go wander the bush. I go geese and moose hunting," says Marcus. "Being an Anishinaabe person,

"How long IS IT GOING TO TAKE FOR THE PEOPLE TO trust THE WATER?"

we're born to protect the land. That's just who we are. Our identity is the land, the water; to hunt, to fish, to practice our way of life. Most of our people see it as healing. You're free out there."

Neskantaga Chief Chris Moonias was also raised in the traditions of his ancestors, learning to hunt, fish

and trap on the vast territory surrounding Attawapiskat Lake. From a young age, he absorbed the teachings of his parents and Elders, developing a deep connection to the land and waters that have sustained his people for generations.

Chief Moonias says he's fed up with his community living in a constant state of emergency. He has steadily sparred with the federal government over getting the water issue resolved during his two-term role as chief.

"We want to be heard," he says from his desk in the band office on the reserve. "You know, my father stood against the government, against residential schools. He wouldn't allow it. He was threatened that his benefits would be cut off, but he did it anyway and raised us kids on the land. Maybe that's the reason why I am the way I am. I stand up for the people, and I advocate hard."

Chief Moonias helped oversee the lawsuit filed against Canada in 2019 by Neskantaga and Curve Lake. Another case was filed in Manitoba's

superior court by Tataskweyak Cree Nation in the same year. The lawsuits amalgamated to include a class action on behalf of all First Nations across Canada subject to drinking water advisories. The primary allegation was that Canada violated its responsibilities to First Nations and their members by not providing clean water to reserve communities. It was also claimed that Canada acted negligently, failed to uphold its fiduciary duties, violated the honour of the Crown and breached several rights outlined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. In 2021, the government of Canada offered a settlement deal of about \$8 billion to 120 First Nations communities eligible for funds to improve their water systems, including the costs of building, operating and maintaining infrastructure. The settlement also included 142,000 people from 258 First Nations eligible for individual compensation.

But while government testing shows that Neskantaga's upgraded water treatment facility has been producing clean water since 2020, the trauma of living nearly three decades without access to safe drinking water has left its mark, and the healing process could take generations. The community has opted to keep the boil water advisory for now.

"There's the mental health portion of it — it's going to be a long process. It's been 10,870 days [as of November 2024] since the boil water advisory was issued. How long is it going to take for the people to trust the water?" says the chief. "Why do I bring children home almost every year by coffin





not to lift the advisory until they feel completely comfortable,” says Hajdu.

The current upgraded water treatment plant in Neskantaga has about 10 years of operational life left, added Hajdu. However, the minister says her government is financially backing Neskantaga in the design phase of a brand new one.

In the meantime, residents are still getting sick and developing sores, says Chief Moonias.

“A lot of people still get sores, rashes,” he says, itching the skin on his arm, which he says is irritated from showering in Neskantaga. “When I leave town for my business trips, the rash disappears.”

While it’s unclear what is causing these skin issues, other issues in Neskantaga, such as overcrowding and not trusting the water to bathe in, could be contributing factors.

Still, one of the biggest issues with water quality in Indigenous communities in Canada is that there are no clean drinking water regulations.

“The quality of our water is not regulated,” says Chief Moonias. “There are no standards to go by. Ontario has standards, Canada has standards, but First Nations don’t.”

While provinces regulate drinking water off-reserve, First Nations fall under federal jurisdiction, creating a regulatory gap. And the federal government hasn’t implemented comprehensive water quality regulations specifically for reserves, leaving First Nations without the same legal protections for safe drinking water that other Canadians enjoy.

Hajdu is hopeful Bill C-61, the proposed First Nations Clean Water Act, which she introduced in 2023 after years of advocacy by Indigenous leaders, will soon receive royal assent. The legislation will be operated independent of the Indian Act and commits the federal government to provide “adequate and sustainable funding” for

that went away from here? Why did I have to bring my best friend home to bury him when he was approved for home dialysis, but he couldn’t come home because of the boil water advisory? Why do I bring Elders home almost every month? Because they die of loneliness in Thunder Bay [where they have to go] because there’s no services here.”

Minister of Indigenous Services Patty Hajdu says the water crisis in Neskantaga is emblematic of the long-standing frayed relationship between First Nations and Canada.

“There’s still a long way to go in terms of reconciliation,” Hajdu says. Going in, “you’re representing a colonial government that has inflicted a tremendous harm on First Nations as part of many policies over the years

that have led to the situation we find ourselves in today.”

“In terms of the plant itself, it’s substantially complete. But the community has a high degree of distrust. How could they trust the water [after everything they’ve been through]?” Hajdu says.

She points to water quality tests completed in 2020 by environmental public health officers that determined that the plant was producing water that met the guidelines for Canadian drinking water quality, despite elevated levels of chlorite, a residual from the disinfecting process.

“Chlorite does not usually result in a drinking water advisory in other communities. But given Neskantaga’s reasonable fear of water, the chief and council have made the decision



Clayton John Moonias (left, TOP LEFT) with his sons Leighton and Landon, out on the land (ABOVE), just downstream from the Ring of Fire development. An orange t-shirt (BOTTOM LEFT) shows solidarity for the thousands of Indigenous children who were sent to residential schools.

including one of the world’s largest peatland complexes that plays a crucial role in carbon sequestration and natural water filtration, is largely undeveloped, with no all-season roads connecting it to the rest of Ontario.

It’s also teeming with mineral deposits like chromite, nickel, copper and

environmental protection amid a lack of meaningful consultation.

“We haven’t given our free, prior and informed consent to any development in our territory. We have not been properly consulted by Doug Ford or his government. There hasn’t been any accommodation for Neskantaga to understand the Ring of Fire development. And what is going to happen to our way of life, what’s going to happen to our land?” asks the chief.

In June, the province announced a deal with four First Nations to build new roads, other infrastructure projects and to provide the skills training to kickstart the development of the region.

But Chief Moonias is frustrated that Neskantaga is being by-passed in the process. Ontario has committed to invest \$1 billion in the Ring of Fire, while Neskantaga struggles with its long-term water crisis.

“How many First Nations communities have ever benefited from companies extracting resources from their territories?” says Chief Moonias. “Why are we living like this? Why don’t the companies and government negotiate with us and give us part of the benefits?”

water services, with minimum levels set by the recent settlement agreement on long-term drinking water advisories.

Training community members to operate the new complex computerized water treatment plant is another barrier in a small community like Neskantaga. To help bridge the gap, Indigenous Services Canada finances the Ontario Clean Water Agency to provide full-time operational oversight of the water system and to train local operators.

WHILE CHIEF MOONIAS spends most of his energy addressing the traumas of the inequities in Neskantaga, another threat to their well-being is on the horizon. Ontario’s Ring of Fire region is only about 100 kilometres upstream. The area of vast boreal forest, home to diverse wildlife and extensive wetlands,

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platinum, used for electric vehicle batteries and manufacturing, and valued at upwards of \$90 billion.

But many of the First Nations whose traditional territories encompass the proposed development are grappling with the potential for economic benefits versus the need for



Dayna Scott, professor at Osgoode Hall Law School and the faculty of environmental and urban change at York University, equates the water crisis with a lack of political will among the Ontario and federal governments.

“We are not in an environment of scarcity,” says Scott, who has collaborated on research projects and environmental assessments with Neskantaga related to the Ring of Fire.

“The province is spending millions on subsidies for [electric vehicle] battery-makers for the Ring of Fire and \$1 billion on the road to the Ring of Fire [and other infrastructure], all for the benefit of a mining company,” says Scott. “Yet they seem unwilling to really work towards improving community conditions on the ground.”

DEREK MOONIAS heads out on his weekly trek an hour’s drive from the reserve. After navigating a bumpy dirt

road, he hikes into the bush to access a fresh underground spring. It’s nestled at the end of a forest path cluttered with fallen trees and moss beds that sink deep into the earth. The spring is one of two in the area that are treasured by Neskantaga community members.

“WE ARE NOT IN AN ENVIRONMENT OF scarcity.”

When he was a child, Derek’s grandfather showed him the springs and taught him about their ancestral way of life. Derek vowed to never lose the knowledge of the landscape and to always know where to find fresh water. He bends down to pray in Anishinaabemowin and lowers a plastic container into the bubbling spring.

Derek Moonias collects water at a natural spring to drop off to the homes of Elders.

After filling three large plastic bottles, he cups his hand, dips it into the water and takes a sip. He releases a long sigh of comfort.

“That [water] right there, that’s sacred. This water I gathered here will go to the Elders. They crave this, and I’m very glad to do this for them.”

And soon Derek will be in their shoes. “I’m getting close to the age when I’ll be called an Elder, maybe in another 12 to 15 years,” he acknowledges back at the cemetery. “I don’t know yet how to explain these new things we face. Where did suicide come from, how does it exist in our culture, how do we manage it?”

He then asks the ultimate question: *will we ever be able to drink the water?* ☁