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MEDIA RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

UNKNOWN SHEEN IN WATER RESERVOIR FORCES WATER OUTAGE IN NESKANTAGA FIRST NATION

LANDSDOWNE HOUSE, ON: Neskantaga First Nation Chief Chris Moonias and his Council today will be deciding on the fate of its residents after being forced to completely shut down community water going into community homes yesterday after finding an unknown sheen in its water reservoir system. Water samples were taken by Nibi Water Services of Matawa First Nations Management yesterday with results expecting to take a maximum of 10 days. It is unknown at this time when the water will return to service.

The community has also been dealing with low water reservoir issues for the past couple of months and have needed to do controlled water-shut downs during sleeping hours in order to allow for the system to accumulate and treat water going through each next day.

“Once again, our community is dealing with another water treatment issue. Although this one may differ from the ones we’ve seen in the past—it is still dehumanizing to have to ask for portable showers, portable water heaters, wet wipes and other hygienic and sanitary supplies during this crisis,” said Chief Moonias. He asked, “what country do we live in again and which other community asks for supplies to address the fact that they don’t have water?”

The shut down of water, for an undetermined time at this point, will impact on the community’s ability to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the provision of education and health services. All services in the community have to be shut down which gravely impacts community members’ quality of life. Additionally, the Reverse Osmosis (RO) Unit was shut down yesterday. It was the only other source of potable drinking water where members were able to go with their jugs. The RO unit, installed as an interim measure, is now no longer available due not having a water source to treat.

The leadership of the community is calling the water outage a public health emergency as a high percentage of people suffer from various levels of diabetes and chronic diseases. “We are deeply frustrated that we have been denied our human right to water for 9,393 days now—we can’t help but feel that the “out of sight, out of mind” situation has greatly contributed to governments dragging their feet on our crisis,” said Chief Chris Moonias.

Community Elder Peter Moonias said, “My wife is one person of many in the community who have chronic and underlying medical conditions that make not having water a very hard struggle. She’s a breast cancer survivor and suffers from diabetes which has affected her eyes, kidneys and prevents her from lifting anything over 10 pounds.” He added, “We are talking about real lives at risk here—how are we expected to not to be completely frustrated and outraged when this has been going on for over a century now?”

A decision on how the community will respond to the current situation will be made in the next day or so. A preliminary decision to implement a phase 1 self-evacuation plan for the community’s most vulnerable has been made. Neskantaga First Nation is demanding that Indigenous Services Canada fully support this decision. In September of 2019, the community self-evacuated their most vulnerable people due to a break down in water pump and back up water pumps.

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Neskantaga First Nation is situated in Northern Ontario on Attawapiskat Lake, 430 kms north east of Thunder Bay, Ontario. It is a remote community of 460 members and is accessible only by air or winter ice-road. Approximately 160 members live off-reserve.

For more information, please contact: Chief Chris Moonias at (807) 629-1877.