

# WALKERTON 25 YEARS LATER: REFLECTING ON PROGRESS AND PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

**T**his year marks the 25th anniversary of the Walkerton water tragedy – an event that profoundly changed the way Ontario protects its drinking water. At Ontario's Water Conference & Trade Show 2025, a special panel titled "Walkerton 25 Years Later: Lessons, Progress, and the Road Ahead" brought together three key voices in the sector: Steven Carrasco from the Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP), Dr. Wajid Ahmed from the Ministry of Health, and Victoria Colling from the Walkerton Clean Water Centre (WCWC). The discussion was moderated by Michele Grenier, Executive Director of OWWA, and focused on the legacy of the Walkerton Inquiry, challenges facing small and remote systems, and the emerging issues that will shape the next 25 years.

## A SYSTEM TRANSFORMED: LESSONS FROM THE WALKERTON INQUIRY

Panelists began by revisiting the transformative changes prompted by the Walkerton Inquiry. Justice Dennis O'Connor's 121 recommendations became the foundation of Ontario's current drinking water safety net.

Steven Carrasco highlighted the multi-barrier approach, a now-standard "source-to-tap" strategy that addresses water protection at every stage – from watershed protection to distribution system

monitoring. The Clean Water Act (2006) and mandatory Source Water Protection Plans emerged as major successes, empowering communities and ensuring that threats to drinking water are identified and prevented from impacting water sources. He also emphasized the value of strong oversight bodies, including those within the MECP, that enforce compliance, issue public reports, and guide system improvements.

Transparency has also improved. Ontario now publishes an extensive water compliance and enforcement dataset and annual reports from the Minister and Chief Drinking Water Inspector – tools that rebuild and sustain public trust.

Victoria Colling added the crucial role of the Walkerton Clean Water Centre, established in 2004 under O. Reg. 304/04. The Centre not only provides operator training and technical support, but also educates

the public, including youth, to build awareness and trust in water systems. WCWC's hands-on courses, pilot testing, helpline, and operator certification programs help ensure operators understand both what is required and why it matters.

The Drinking Water Quality Management Standard (DWQMS), developed in direct response to Justice O'Connor's recommendations, has become a cornerstone of the system, embedding risk-based, preventive practices into the everyday culture of water operations.

Dr. Ahmed framed public health's evolution over the last 25 years as a shift toward prevention, risk-based oversight, and inter-agency collaboration. Public health now plays a proactive role in protecting drinking water, particularly in small and non-municipal systems where public health inspectors often serve as a first line of defence.

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**– VICTORIA COLLING, WALKERTON  
CLEAN WATER CENTRE**





**"PUBLIC HEALTH NOW PLAYS A PROACTIVE ROLE IN PROTECTING DRINKING WATER, ESPECIALLY IN SMALL AND NON-MUNICIPAL SYSTEMS WHERE INSPECTORS ARE OFTEN THE FIRST LINE OF DEFENCE." – DR. WAJID AHMED, MINISTRY OF HEALTH**



### PERSISTENT GAPS: CHALLENGES IN SMALL AND REMOTE SYSTEMS

The panel acknowledged that while Ontario has made significant progress, small and remote systems still face enduring barriers.

Common challenges include aging infrastructure, limited technical capacity, and geographical isolation. Dr. Ahmed noted that many small systems, particularly those in Indigenous or rural communities, struggle with inconsistent oversight, seasonal staffing, and limited access to trained personnel or emergency response resources.

To address these gaps, Colling emphasized WCWC's expanded outreach: scheduling training in remote regions like Bancroft and Timmins, revising the Operation of Small Drinking Water Systems (OSDWS) course to include flexible delivery (self-directed plus virtual instruction), and increasing inspector training for both MECP and public health staff.

She also highlighted the importance of collaboration across ministries and public agencies, including webinars on harmful algal blooms, workshops for school boards and camps, and targeted training

for First Nations operators and small system owners.

Funding support has also grown. Steven Carrasco pointed to recent MECP programs such as the Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund (HEWSF) and Municipal Housing Infrastructure Program (MHIP), which collectively have committed nearly \$1.5 billion to upgrade or expand water systems and safeguard public health – particularly in the face of Ontario's housing boom and intensifying climate risks.

### THE ROAD AHEAD: CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT 25 YEARS

Looking to the future, all three panelists underscored the urgent need to prepare for climate change, emerging contaminants, digital transformation, and workforce renewal.

Dr. Ahmed warned of increasingly complex water safety risks, from PFAS and microplastics to climate-induced flooding, drought, and source water degradation. He called for a more equitable approach to ensure all communities, regardless of size or geography, have access to clean, safe drinking water.

Carrasco noted MECP's shift toward data-driven regulation, flexible compliance

## Key Takeaways

- Ontario's multi-barrier framework is now a model for drinking water safety, rooted in Justice O'Connor's recommendations.
- Public health's role has shifted to prevention, oversight, and collaboration, especially in non-municipal systems.
- Small and remote systems remain vulnerable, but are increasingly supported through targeted training, funding, and policy reform.
- The sector must prepare for climate change, emerging contaminants, cybersecurity threats, and a changing workforce.
- Continued collaboration, innovation, and education are essential to safeguarding drinking water for future generations.

tools, and stakeholder collaboration to proactively manage risks. Cybersecurity, climate adaptation, and energy resilience are now front-line concerns for regulators and operators alike.

Colling reflected on the evolving skillsets needed in water operations: "In the past, it was about fixing broken pumps. Today, it's about preventive checks. Tomorrow, it will be about interpreting AI-driven alerts." She emphasized the Centre's work on cybersecurity awareness through DWQMS workshops and the ongoing effort to prepare the workforce for a digital future.

Workforce shortages also loomed large. Colling noted that operator roles suffer from low public visibility and recruitment challenges. The sector is now working collaboratively, with ministries, educational institutions, and industry groups, to promote careers in water, starting as early as high school.

The panel closed with a reminder that Ontario's water sector has come a long way – but constant vigilance is non-negotiable. Public trust, built painstakingly over 25 years, must be maintained through transparency, education, and investment in people and systems.

As Colling put it, "The lessons of Walkerton were hard-earned. We honour them by continuing to evolve, collaborate, and never take safe drinking water for granted."

**"ONTARIO'S MULTI-BARRIER APPROACH IS A MODEL OF WATER SAFETY, BUILT ON THE FOUNDATION OF THE WALKERTON INQUIRY'S RECOMMENDATIONS." – STEVEN CARRASCO, MECP**

