

Victory at Site 41 Shows There Is No Water to Waste



all photos by Mark Calzavara

LEFT: Maude Barlow, National Chairperson of the Council of Canadians, fills a container with some of the purest water in the world in the farm fields near Site 41. **ABOVE:** A huge sign and teepee were set up at Site 41 to protest construction of the dump on top of water that was scientifically tested to be some of “the purest in the world.”

by **Mark Calzavara**

The purest groundwater ever tested is found under and around Site 41 in Simcoe County in southern Ontario.

Ask Dr. William Shotyk, an expert on water quality at Germany’s Heidelberg University. He will tell you about the water that is so pure that modern science’s most sensitive instruments cannot detect contaminants in it. Ask the cottagers who come from miles around to replenish their supply from this source. They will tell you about their Friday evening ritual and how the dusty drive up from the noise and traffic of the city is washed away at the communal flow, where they wait their turn to collect this water. Cold, clear, free. Ask the farmers who have worked this land for generations. They will tell you about the movement of these waters beneath the fields – of the springs that burst forth free and abundant during the snow melt and retreat before the harvest. Ask the First Nations who have known this water for 8,000 years or more. They will tell you they honour this water and they protect it.

In late August the most recent chapter was written in the 26-year battle to stop a garbage dump from being built

at Site 41, in Tiny Township, just north of Elmvale, Ontario. Hundreds gathered that day at the Simcoe County municipal buildings to witness what may be a turning point, not only in the protection of this remarkable natural resource, but also in our attitudes towards water in a country that once believed it had such an abundance it could risk contamination for the sake of convenience.

The day begins with final preparations at our hotel in Barrie. We huddle over coffee as the latest information from our allies is shared. Four months of intense work is expected to result in a vote for a year-long moratorium on the construction of the dump. If we lose, the garbage will arrive before the first snowfall.

At the so-called Information Session put on by the County just before the Council meeting, an overflow crowd is waiting. Many of these are people who have been going door to door in key communities, telling others about the risk to the water and reinforcing the message the Council of Canadians has saturated local radio and newspapers with: “Call your councillor. Tell them to vote for the moratorium to give us a year to examine the new facts about the suitability of the site revealed by recent construction. Tell them to vote to obey the Information

and Privacy Commissioner’s order to release the secret computer modelling information that supposedly justifies putting a dump on the purest groundwater ever found. Tell them to drop the charges against the 17 people arrested for protecting the water.”

It is clear the County staff and councillors don’t want to hear what community members have to say – the meeting is a bust. We walk out rather than give legitimacy to the County’s feeble communications exercise. We came for a vote. Let’s have it.

Three hours after Simcoe County council convened there is still no end in sight. Councillors have gone behind closed doors in a hastily called in camera session. It’s impossible to know what is going on. Instead, the crowds of people stand anxiously for hours in the blazing sun outside the closed meeting room. People, use the time to share stories. And we wait.

At the north end of the Parnell dairy farm, acres of knee-high clover surround a collection of tents and teepees. This camp, directly across the road from the gates of Site 41, was set up by five women from the nearby Beausoleil First Nation

reserve who came to participate in the “Walk for the Water” march last May. The women had intended to stay for only three days, but were inspired to stay longer by Maude Barlow’s stories of communities from around the world that had successfully protected their own water from bad development plans and greedy multinational corporations. Across the road, they could see the earth-moving machines that had already begun to strip away the soil, exposing the underground rivers. Simcoe County’s plan was to dump more than one million tons of garbage in this hole. The water underneath it was to be “protected” by a plastic liner only 0.5 millimetres thick. The women embraced their traditional role as Anishinabe and vowed to stay and protect the water.

Signs at the entrance of the camp welcome all visitors and proclaim the importance of water to Anishinabe culture. The signs declare the peaceful nature of the camp – no weapons, no alcohol, no drugs are allowed. Another sign politely declines donations of bottled water. No thank you, we already have the best water in the world.

On the right is the kitchen tent stocked with cutlery, dishes and coffee cups that come straight from the cupboards of local farmhouse. Every day, home-cooked meals arrive in the hands of volunteers coming from near and far. On the left is a traditional lodge erected over the sacred fire that has burned continuously since the first day of the camp. By tradition, the sacred fire is tended by men and burns only hardwood. The farmers who live nearby provide that hardwood; they also helped build the lodge. They are grateful for the determination and energy of the Anishinabe Kwe, which has helped rejuvenate the community opposition to the dump.

After another Walk for the Water rally in early July, the camp became the base of support for one of the most successful blockades in recent memory and a focal point in the fight against Site 41. For more than a month, construction was stopped by a combination of local farmers, First Nations people and activists from all over. These people became friends, going on shifts lasting up to twelve hours, knitting, smoking, gossiping and sometimes laughing together in surprise at what they were doing. Some of them had never had so much as a parking ticket, but now found themselves risking arrest and jail. Even after some were arrested, their determination never flagged.



ABOVE: Over the summer, hundreds of people took part in rallies calling for a halt in the construction of Site 41.

FINALLY, A DEMOCRATIC DECISION

When Simcoe County council eventually opens the doors, councillors quickly vote to drop the lawsuit against the protesters, deciding instead to fight Ontario’s Information and Privacy Commissioner over an order to release groundwater flow data used to approve the dump.

Finally, the motion for a one-year construction moratorium is tabled and the debate begins. Emotions in the audience can barely be contained. These feelings spill over to the hundreds of people outside who weren’t able to find room in the council chambers. Instead, they listen to the audio feed and are able to voice their feelings with cheers and jeers as the coun-

cillors debate back and forth.

In the end, it wasn’t even close. The dump that was originally approved by a one-vote margin was put on hold by 22 councillors voting against 10. But our work is not done. Over the next year, we will join with our allies to put an end to Site 41 for good. We will also continue to press all levels of government to accept the urgent need and responsibility to protect water sources across Canada. There are literally dozens of other communities fighting similar battles, and while they may not all be fought over the purest groundwater ever found, those communities know that there is no water to waste.

Mark Calzavara is the Ontario-Quebec Regional Organizer for the Council of Canadians.

UPDATE

On September 22 Simcoe County Council voted overwhelmingly in favour of abandoning all plans for a dump at Site 41. The decision came as a result of sustained public pressure from the local community, farmers, First Nations groups, the Council of Canadians, and organizations from across Canada. A ceremony was held at the campsite that evening to celebrate the outcome. The sacred fire that had burned continuously for 139 days was allowed to burn out. “It is a significant victory after a 26-year struggle,” said Council of Canadians chairperson Maude Barlow. “Our members should feel very proud that they helped protect the purest ground water ever discovered for generations to come.”