

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## HEALTH UNIT ISSUES COBALT LAKE ADVISORY

COBALT, ON – June 17, 2005. The Timiskaming Health Unit has issued a public health advisory for Cobalt Lake following water sampling test results that identified arsenic levels above federal and provincial drinking water guidelines. Signs have been posted around the lake to advise residents and visitors against the recreational use of Cobalt Lake, including swimming, playing, or fishing.

The Timiskaming Health Unit would like to reassure residents that the municipal drinking water system is not affected by this advisory. The municipal water source is Sasaginaga Lake, and our drinking water is regularly monitored by local and provincial authorities to ensure it meets the Ministry of Environment's Ontario Drinking Water Standards.

Historic mining activities in Cobalt included the disposal of mining waste rock, or tailings, in Cobalt Lake, before the environmental impacts of these practices were fully understood by scientists. Today, it is recognized that mine tailings may contain chemicals and elements, including arsenic, which could represent a potential risk to human health under certain exposure conditions, specifically accidental ingestion.

"We want residents and visitors to be aware of this situation so they can take steps to protect themselves from exposure, which will reduce the potential for any health effects," said Dr. Pat Logan, acting Medical Officer of Health. "Specifically, these steps are to avoid any recreational use of the lake so as to prevent accidental ingestion of lake water."

Arsenic is a naturally occurring substance in the earth's crust and presents no unacceptable health risk under normal conditions. The body naturally regulates levels of metal and arsenic, which are readily excreted unless excess exposure occurs. Minimizing exposure to excess levels of metals allows the body to eliminate them naturally, which significantly reduces the risk of potential health effects.

Occasional, short-term contact with water containing elevated levels of arsenic is unlikely to cause serious health effects; however, long-term exposure to high levels may lead to health concerns.

Mild, short-term symptoms associated with accidental ingestion of elevated levels of arsenic may include nausea and vomiting, and a sensation of pins and needles in hands and feet shortly after an exposure. Skin contact may cause redness and swelling. Ingesting low levels of arsenic over a long period of time may cause a darkening of the skin and the appearance of small corns or warts on the palms, soles, and torso. People experiencing any of these symptoms are advised to contact their physician.

“The Timiskaming Health Unit is dedicated to the protection of public health,” said Dr. Logan. “We will keep the public informed as new information becomes available on this health advisory.”

For more information, please contact, Ryan Peters at the Timiskaming Health Unit, 647-4305 or 1-866-747-4305.