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Walkerton officials discuss fate of utility foreman

TORONTO — With the Walkerton inquiry report due for release in less than three weeks, the town's council will soon rule on the employment of one of the key figures in the *E. coli* tragedy.

The council is scheduled to meet today, 3 January, in a private session to thrash out what should be done with Frank Koebel, the former foreman of the now defunct Walkerton public utilities commission, and brother of its former manager, Stan Koebel, the Associated Press (AP) reported.

There may be pressure to settle the employment issue before the release of the report into the tragedy by Associate Chief Justice Dennis O'Connor, AP said.

The *E. coli* outbreak occurred in May 2000. Seven people in Walkerton died from infection and 2,300 became ill. The incident has been tentatively blamed on farm runoff and inadequate chlorination. Canadian officials at the Water Security Summit in Hartford, CT, in December, said severe rainfall just before the outbreak may also have contributed to the problem, washing contaminants — cow feces chief among them — from farms downhill to reservoirs that supplied some of the town's drinking water.

The report, scheduled to be made public 22 January, eight days after it is handed over to the Ontario government, is expected to be critical of Frank Koebel, AP reported.

The news service said the inquiry into the tragedy heard evidence from Koebel and others that he falsified safety records and haphazardly monitored the town's drinking water, and that he believed it was unnecessary to follow guidelines for disinfection of the water.

Koebel went on sick leave in August 2000, three months after the deadly waterborne outbreak, and his employment has been in dispute ever since, AP said.