

RMA Backgrounder – Auditor General’s Report on Surface Water Management

August 23, 2024

About the Report

On July 10, 2024, the office of the [Alberta Auditor General](#) shared the findings of their inquiry into the [management practices of surface water in Alberta](#). The report considered three main areas: Surface Water Management Planning, Licensing and Compliance Monitoring and Public Reporting on Surface Water. Across these areas, the highly critical report found a general lack of adequate and proactive water management processes, lenient compliance and accountability methods and insufficient public reporting on water license allocation and usage. Accordingly, the recommendations from the Auditor General call for enhanced standardized procedures for water conservation, improved license compliance, and more comprehensive public reporting on surface water.

RMA Initial Reaction:

The Auditor General’s report is an investigative and concise evaluation of Environment and Protected Areas’ (EPA) surface water management practices. It is unclear what triggered the report but the topic is very timely, given the current drought context in Alberta. The report contains important findings and recommendations that have particular relevance to RMA and RMA members. The recommendations, if implemented, would promote accountability and transparency, support proactive planning and engagement and enable more standardized, systematic surface water management.

Key Findings

Surface Water Management planning

The report identified that there is no standardized process to decide when to develop or update water conservation objectives, highlighting the province’s reactive rather than proactive approach to surface water management. It also found that river basins in the central and northern parts of the province, which hold most the province’s water, have no water conservation objectives. Finally, the report identified gaps regarding how existing water conservation initiatives and objectives are evaluated for their effectiveness, implying they are not up to date or fully transparent.

Licensing and Compliance Monitoring

The report found that due to a lack of clear decision and assessment documentation, there is no reliable and publicly accessible way to assess the factors that were considered for license approvals or denials, highlighting a lack of transparency within the review process. Additionally, some license guidelines are not comprehensive and not specific, making it difficult for applicants or the public to understand the Director’s (as defined by the EPA Minister) jurisdictional roles, license compliance checks, which water availability assessments are mandatory, and other regulatory tools the department uses. These gaps enable leniency, create uncertainty and further hinder accountability.

Public Reporting on Surface Water

The report identified that although public water allocation data is available, it is not accessible to people without technical expertise. Furthermore, water usage across the province is not typically publicly reported, and when this data is collected, it is often inaccurate and incomplete.

How would the recommendations benefit members?

Recommendation 1: Establish a process to identify when to develop, assess, and update water conservation objectives

This recommendation would ensure that a standard procedure exists for a wide variety of scenarios and needs involving surface water management. It would enable more proactive planning, limit time-consuming engagement with other stakeholders and affected parties, simplify decision-making and streamline water conservation efforts across the province. For example, the current Water Sharing Agreements/MOUs were finalized in April following months of planning and discussion. An established process for water conservation objectives may have expedited this process, freeing up time and resources for municipalities and other stakeholders to use towards other needs.

Recommendation 2: Improve licensing and compliance-monitoring processes

This recommendation calls on EPA to ensure licenses are well documented, monitored and adhere to the established requirements to maintain consistency. These measures are much needed provincially and would add benefit to our members ensuring that larger and older license holders under the existing priority system are held accountable. It would also promote increased transparency and overall trust, enabling municipalities to hold the province accountable to follow through on its commitment to maintain compliance. Effective license compliance would additionally minimize the over-consumption of surface water by offending license holders and limit water supply depletion, especially important in times of drought and water shortage.

Recommendation 3: Publicly report relevant and reliable information on managing surface water

Providing comprehensive and reliable data and information on surface water enables transparency and builds trust between municipalities and the province. It additionally provides agency to municipalities, empowering them to enact independent and proactive planning and decision-making, especially amid drought and water shortages.

What is RMA Doing to Support Members?

- ◆ RMA supports municipalities working with other water users to develop water-sharing agreements. The RMA's role as an observer to these water-sharing agreements is intended to monitor the status of water shortage and drought in high-risk regions and advocate on behalf of members as necessary.
- ◆ RMA is a member of the multi-stakeholder Drought Advisory Committee formed by the Government of Alberta in 2024 and works to provide input representing the unique needs of rural municipalities in times of severe drought.
- ◆ RMA supports multi-stakeholder approaches involving consistent communication and transparency to address severe drought and acute water shortage circumstances.
- ◆ The RMA will continue to review and monitor the provincial drought situation and the province's response to keep members up to date and advocate for initiatives and changes that would add benefit to our members.



Have Questions?

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