



**BC WATERSHED
SECURITY COALITION**

MODERNIZING INDUSTRIAL WATER RATES IN BC:

Ending the Great Water Giveaway

*A Fair Solution to
Protect Our Water Sources,
Safeguard Communities and
Secure Long-Term Prosperity*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

British Columbia has one of the lowest industrial water rates in the country, effectively giving away massive volumes of water—our most precious natural resource—to some of the world’s largest companies. Meanwhile, communities across the province are struggling to fund efforts to fight increasing droughts, floods, and wildfires.

By ending the Great Water Giveaway and bringing industrial water rates in line with those in other provinces, the BC government can take a practical, fiscally responsible step toward lasting watershed security across the province—without increasing costs for taxpayers.

Reinvesting these revenues would provide stable, long-term funding for communities to ensure sustainable water supplies—protecting jobs, supporting food production, strengthening the economy, and helping people stay safe and resilient in the face of a changing climate.

THE PROBLEM

Over the past 30 years, British Columbia’s watersheds have become increasingly degraded—straining local and regional economies. From Dawson Creek to Tofino, towns are facing the prospect of running out of fresh water, while farmers, small businesses, and industries are dealing with increasingly frequent water cut-offs. Meanwhile, flood and wildfire disasters are now costing the province billions of dollars.

Without urgent investments to strengthen water management and restore degraded watersheds, these costs will continue to rise—threatening community well-being and undermining BC’s economic growth strategy.

Experts estimate at least \$100 million annually is needed to rebuild watershed security across BC. Yet since 2022, provincial funding for locally driven watershed projects has fallen by over 80%, to less than \$5 million annually through the BC Watershed Security Fund.

THE OPPORTUNITY

British Columbia can unlock new, sustainable funding for watershed security—at no cost to taxpayers—by modernizing outdated industrial water rental rates and reinvesting growing water revenues from hydropower generation.

BC's industrial users currently pay at most **\$2.25 per million litres of water—by far the lowest rate in Canada** among provinces with similar water licensing systems.

By updating industrial water rates to match other provinces and reinvesting water revenue from hydropower, BC can:

- Strengthen provincial water management systems
- Fund local, community-led watershed solutions
- Build a frontline watershed workforce

These investments will create business certainty, reduce water conflicts, avoid billions in disaster costs, and support thousands of good jobs across the province.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GOVERNMENT

1. GENERATE NEW REVENUE BY MODERNIZING INDUSTRIAL WATER RATES

- a. Modernize BC's industrial water rates by aligning with Quebec's rates as a minimum benchmark and aiming for national leadership in valuing water. This could unlock at least \$75 million annually to build BC's watershed workforce.
- b. Reinvest at least 20% of annual water revenue growth from hydropower back into watersheds, creating a self-sustaining stream of approximately \$40 million per year for watershed security.
- c. Establish an independent expert panel to review industrial water rates every three years based on best practices in water pricing. Apply the Consumer Price Index annually.

2. DEDICATE NEW WATER REVENUE TO WATERSHED SECURITY

- a. Allocate \$75 million annually to the BC Watershed Security Fund to create thousands of jobs in the watershed workforce, strengthen Indigenous and rural economies, and sustain the watersheds that underpin BC's long-term prosperity.
- b. Invest at least \$10 million annually to establish a province-wide system of Local Watershed Boards to coordinate watershed planning, share data, manage water use, and respond rapidly to droughts and floods.
- c. Strengthen on-the-ground provincial capacity by hiring regional water staff to work with First Nations, local governments, and local watershed boards to implement provincial water management tools.

1

INTRODUCTION & VISION

BC Needs To Build Watershed Security

Watersheds are the foundation of health, security, and prosperity in British Columbia. The rivers, streams, and aquifers that make up BC's watersheds fuel our economy, nourish our food systems, power our clean energy, and sustain the health and safety of our communities.

Unfortunately, decades of mismanagement, over-allocation, and poorly planned industrial land use—combined with the accelerating impacts of climate change—have pushed the province into an era of watershed insecurity. In recent years, prolonged droughts have depleted water supplies, wildfires have contaminated drinking water sources, floods have damaged homes and businesses, and mounting pressures from industrial and urban growth have triggered conflicts over who gets water and when.

The consequences are already being felt: rising costs for communities, growing tensions among water users, and increasing threats to public health, safety, and food security.

But there is hope. Across BC, a network of local watershed leaders—from First Nations and local governments to farmers, stewardship organizations, and innovative businesses—are already driving solutions. Between 2021 and 2024, provincial support for these frontline workers delivered real results: restored watersheds, protected fish habitat, improved wildfire resilience, enhanced food security, and progress toward reconciliation. Thousands of jobs were created in the process.

That momentum is now at risk. Provincial funding has dried up, jobs have been lost, training programs have scaled down, and critical equipment sits idle—just as the water crisis deepens.

A clear and achievable solution is to revisit BC's outdated industrial water rates. Currently, the province collects hundreds of millions of dollars in water rental revenue from hydropower generation—yet none of it is directed toward protecting or restoring our watersheds. At the same time, large-scale industrial users pay some of the lowest water rates in the country—rates that fail to reflect the true value of water or the cost of managing and safeguarding it.

By modernizing industrial water rates and dedicating new water revenue to watershed security, the provincial government can reinvest in frontline watershed jobs and projects, while ensuring those who profit most from water use contribute fairly to its stewardship.

In this paper, we call for urgent provincial investment in watershed security—and a practical path to get there.



VISION 2035: *A Future We've Built Together*

Fast forward to 2035.

Across British Columbia, rivers flow clean and healthy, even in the heat of summer. Communities are thriving, local economies are strong, and watersheds—once at risk—are now the lifeblood of a stronger, more secure province.

This transformation began in 2025, with bold, sustained provincial investment in watershed security. That investment paid off.

Thousands of good jobs have been created in the watershed workforce, employing young people, First Nations, former forestry workers, and British Columbians of all backgrounds. These jobs have not only restored landscapes—but also renewed relationships, and brought hope, purpose, and opportunity to workers and communities across the province.

Despite a hotter, drier climate, the water shortages that once disrupted farms, fish flows, and entire regions have been replaced with smarter, more resilient systems—restored wetlands, improved natural water storage, and watershed plans designed by the communities who depend on them.

Flood risks have been reduced through natural infrastructure and stewardship of the land:

healthy forests, reconnected floodplains, and integrated wildfire and watershed management. These strategies, many rooted in Indigenous knowledge systems, have protected homes, lives, and livelihoods.

Rural and First Nations economies are thriving with the security that clean, reliable water brings. Business certainty has grown in key sectors—clean energy, forestry, mining, tourism, and agriculture—thanks to inclusive, community-driven watershed plans.

Salmon have returned in abundance. So has a shared sense of responsibility for the land and water. Reconciliation is no longer a goal—it is a practice, visible in the work of local watershed boards where Chiefs and Mayors lead together—working with farmers, businesses, and community members to bring Indigenous and local knowledge into action.

And the children growing up today? They're swimming in clean rivers, learning from the land, and discovering their role in protecting the waters that sustain their communities. They've inherited not just a healthier province—but the knowledge and tools to care for it. **This is the legacy of investing in watershed security. This is what we chose—and built—together.**



2

THE PROBLEM

Increasing Costs, Decreasing Investment

The Declining Health of BC's Watersheds

Over the past 30 years, British Columbia has seen significant degradation of its watersheds—from wetland loss and deforestation to contaminated rivers and disappearing riparian buffers—as shown in Figure 1 below. The degradation of BC's watersheds has weakened critical natural defences to climate change such as the natural flood protection provided by wetlands and water storage provided by mature and diverse forests.

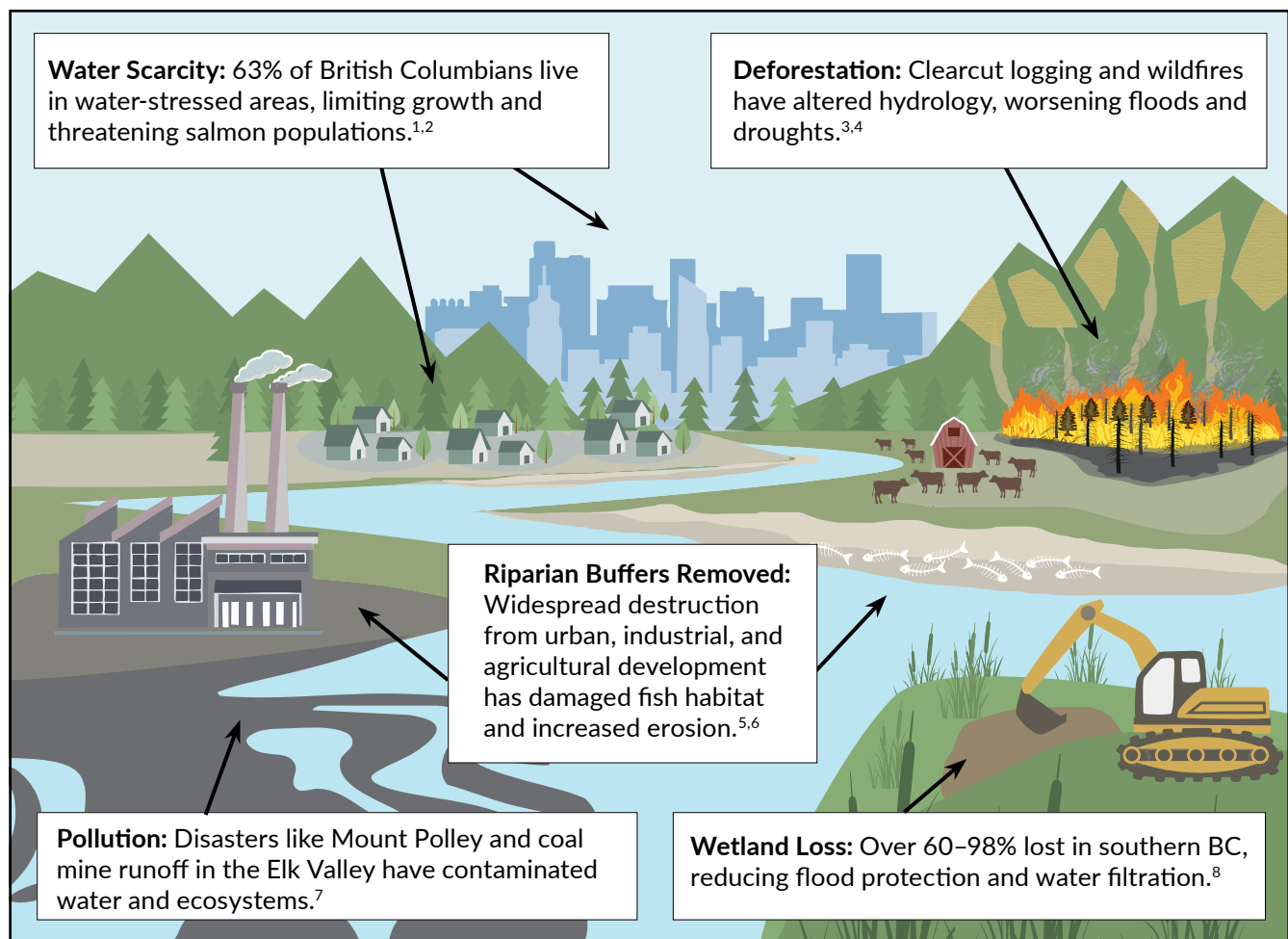


Figure 1: Graphic showing impacts that result in watershed degradation.

The Costs of Watershed Insecurity

Declining watershed health and the loss of natural defences against climate-fueled droughts, fires and floods, is driving up costs for communities, farmers, businesses, and the province.

From Dawson Creek to Tofino, towns face the prospect of running out of drinking water for their residents and local businesses. In 2023, the Village of McBride declared a drought-related state of emergency lasting 241 days. Water scarcity has caused farmers to lose crops, ranchers to sell their herds, and the government to suspend water use for agriculture and industries multiple times.

BC's climate risk assessments warn of increasingly costly "compound events": droughts followed by wildfires, then floods and landslides. These events damage infrastructure, disrupt transportation and agriculture, contaminate water, and threaten public health—leading to billions in recovery costs and lost productivity.⁹ Figure 2 below outlines some of the economic costs incurred by different regions of the province over the past four years.

Without urgent investments to rebuild watersheds and prevent further degradation, BC will continue to see escalating costs to communities and the provincial economy.



Figure 2: Economic costs of water crises over the past four years.

The Investment Gap

In 2023, the Province took a promising step by establishing the BC Watershed Security Fund—a permanent funding mechanism co-governed with First Nations to support community-driven watershed solutions.¹⁶ While this marked a critical milestone, the Fund remains severely under-resourced, providing just \$3–5 million annually in grants across the entire province.

Provincial investment in watershed security has dropped sharply in recent years—from \$57 million through the time-limited Healthy Watersheds Initiative and Indigenous Watersheds Initiative (\$27 million in 2021 and \$30 million in 2022) to less than \$5 million annually in 2024 and 2025 through the Watershed Security Fund (see Figure 3 below).¹⁷ This decline has left many high-impact projects unfunded and stalled local momentum.

For instance, the BC Wildlife Federation trained over 100 workers to restore and maintain more than 250 wetland sites. Due to funding cuts, the workforce was reduced by 75%, limiting activity to fewer than 50 sites.¹⁸

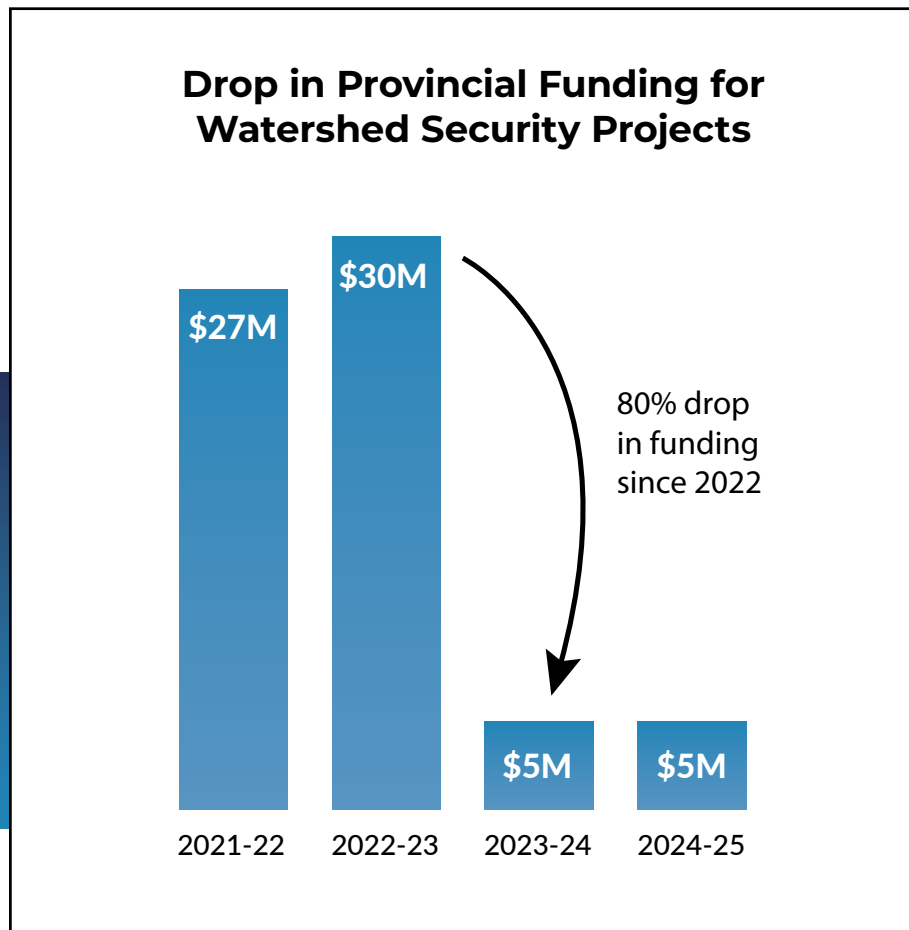


Figure 3: Graphic showing funding decline in watershed security funding (2021-2025).

The Scale of Funding Needed

Water experts estimate that **\$50–100 million annually** is the minimum required to meet BC’s growing watershed security needs—a conservative figure given accelerating climate impacts.¹⁹

The scale of demand for grants from the Watershed Security Fund underscores the gap: in just two intakes between 2024 and 2025, the Fund received 292 applications requesting over \$75 million. Only \$5 million was available from its limited endowment, supplemented by an additional \$7 million from the Real Estate Foundation of BC, allowing a total of 54 projects to be supported as shown in Figure 4 below.²⁰

The Province has acknowledged the shortfall, stating: “We recognize the need for watershed work across the province exceeds current funding availability.... The Province will continue to work with our partners to leverage the original investment and to grow the Fund.”²¹ Despite this acknowledgment, no new provincial funding has been allocated or leveraged since 2023.

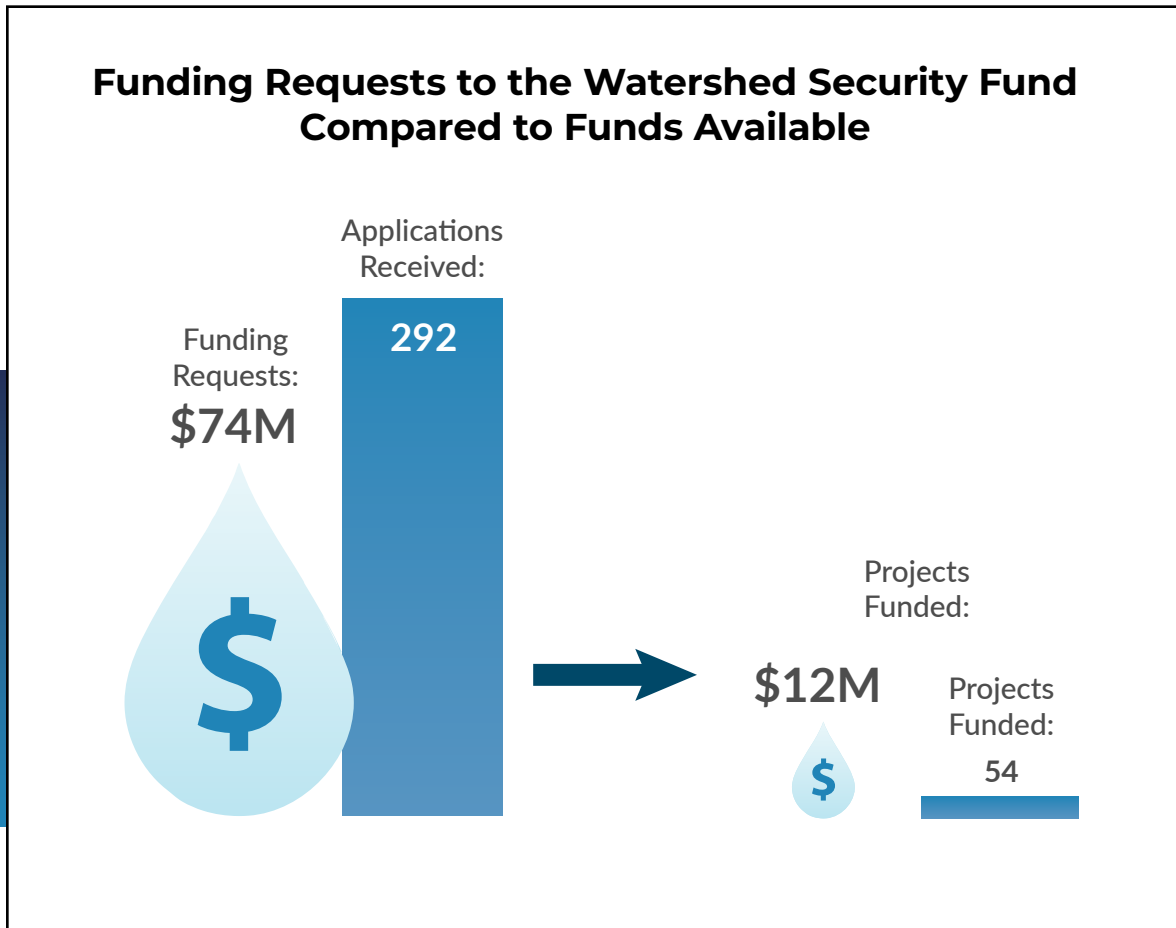


Figure 4: Graphic showing funding requests to the Watershed Security Fund compared to funds available.

ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF INVESTING IN WATERSHEDS

Watersheds are not just ecosystems—they are economic infrastructure, essential to the province's long-term resilience, prosperity, and quality of life. Treating watersheds as core infrastructure transforms risk into opportunity—supporting abundance rather than scarcity, and ensuring BC's future is built on a foundation of ecological and economic resilience.

1

CREATE JOBS:

A World-Class Watershed Workforce

The work of restoring and managing our watersheds currently supports 47,000 jobs and adds \$5 billion to BC's economy, more than agriculture and equal to mining. Economic studies project that an investment of \$100 million annually in the Watershed Security Fund could generate another 13,000 jobs over the next 10 years.²²

EXAMPLE: *Past Watershed Programs Were Major Job Creators. Between 2021 and 2024, provincial investments of \$57 million in the Healthy Watersheds and Indigenous Watershed Initiatives created over 1,800 jobs in more than 110 projects across BC.*²³

2

SAVE BILLIONS:

Strong & Resilient Communities

BC has faced billions of dollars in costs from floods, droughts and wildfires in recent years. Healthy watersheds are the first line of defence against these rising costs. Studies show that natural defences such as wetlands, streambanks, and mature forest canopies provide the same protections as hard infrastructure at half the cost.²⁴

EXAMPLE: *Beaver Dam Analogues are small structures people build to copy what beavers do naturally in streams. They act like natural sponges, holding back water during heavy rains to reduce flooding and slowly releasing it during dry periods.*²⁵

3

GROW THE ECONOMY:

Increased Certainty & Less Conflict

Business certainty is strengthened by the development of watershed plans that provide clarity for industry investment while protecting the rivers, streams and aquifers that underpin community health. Costly disputes over water use are prevented by local watershed boards that develop and implement collaborative local solutions and relationship-building.²⁶

EXAMPLE: *The Cowichan Watershed Board is a proven model of collaborative governance, which has successfully prevented conflicts during times of water stress, driven salmon recovery, and secured millions for watershed initiatives in the region.*²⁷



3

THE OPPORTUNITY

Modernizing BC's Outdated Water Rental System

The BC government has not conducted a review of its water rental system in over a decade. A detailed analysis of this system based on publicly available data reveals two key disconnects:

DISCONNECT #1: The province collects \$400 million a year in water rental fees—nearly all of this from hydropower generation—yet not a single dollar of this revenue is reinvested back into the health of BC's watersheds that supply that water.²⁸

DISCONNECT #2: Industrial water users, who are licensed to withdraw trillions of litres annually, pay some of the lowest water rates in Canada—far below what's charged in provinces like Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Nova Scotia.^{29,30,31}

This section explores how fixing these disconnects can create a fair, sustainable funding stream for watershed security.

Overview of BC's Water Rental System

In BC, if you are a business, municipality, or individual and you want to divert water from a stream or pull it out of the ground, you need to apply for a licence.³² Water licences exist to recognize that water is a shared public resource and that using it comes with responsibilities.

Applicants for a water licence pay a small administrative fee and most users are also required to pay a water rental fee.³³ This rental fee covers the cost of having the right to use a specific amount of water for a specific purpose. It does not convey ownership of the water, it simply provides access to it. Most water users must hold a licence and pay rental fees with exceptions for domestic users who draw water from a well and for First Nations on reserves, Treaty lands, or under modern treaties.³⁴

Water Rentals vs. Residential Water Bills

Water rental licence fees and residential water bills are two distinct systems. Water rentals are paid by industries, farms, and others who withdraw untreated water directly from natural sources like rivers or lakes. These fees are collected by the provincial government. In contrast, residential water bills are charged by municipal governments to cover the cost of treating, delivering, and maintaining drinking water and sewage systems for their residents.

DISCONNECT #1

\$400 MILLION ANNUALLY IN WATER REVENUE NONE DEDICATED TO WATERSHED SECURITY

Between 2020 and 2025, BC has generated an average annual revenue of \$400 million through water rentals as shown in Figure 5.³⁵

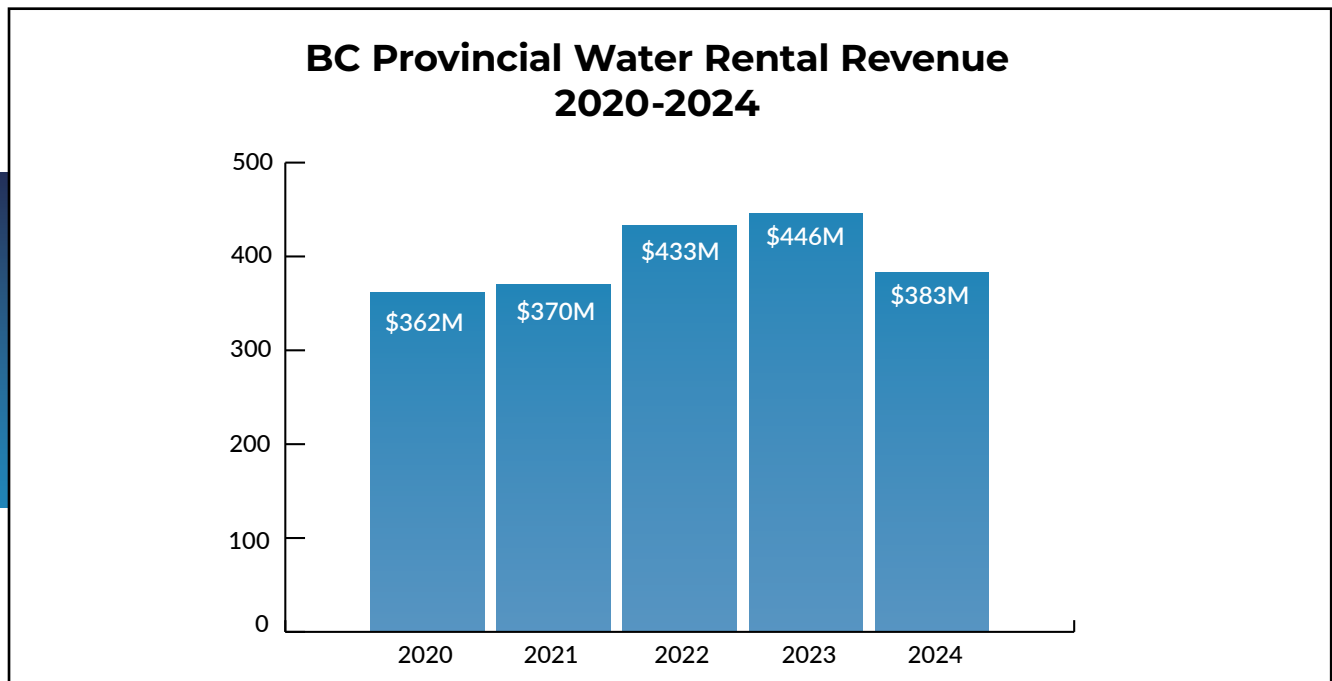


Figure 5: Provincial water rentals revenue 2020-2024; Source: BC Budget & Fiscal Plans

Power vs Non-Power Water Revenue in 2024

Based on an analysis of publicly available water licence data, approximately 97% of water rental revenue comes from hydropower. In contrast, just 3%, approximately \$12 million, comes from users outside the hydropower sector including industrial operations, municipalities, agriculture, and domestic users. Figure 6 illustrates the breakdown of Power vs. Non-Power revenue for 2024 (see Appendix A for the full methodology used to generate these estimates from the publicly available data, and some of the limitations of the available data).

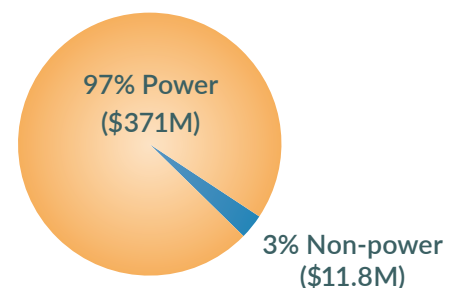


Figure 6: Power vs Non-Power Water Revenue in 2024

At this time, **none** of the revenue generated from water rentals is being dedicated to the management and stewardship of the watersheds from where the water has come from. More than 98% of water revenue is directed to general government funds. A small exception—less than 2%—is directed to the First Nations Clean Energy Business Fund, which supports First Nations participation in clean energy projects and related capacity building.³⁶

Hydropower water rental revenue projected to increase by \$200 million over the next three years

Hydropower is the cornerstone of the province's electricity supply, accounting for 89% of British Columbia's electricity production³⁷ and generating more than 43,000–46,000 gigawatt-hours (GWh) of electricity annually.³⁸ BC Hydro, the main utility, operates over 31 hydroelectric facilities and dams across the region.³⁹ These facilities divert enormous volumes of water. For example, the water licence for the Site C dam allows it to divert up to 2.7 million litres per second.⁴⁰

According to Budget 2025, forecasted water rental revenue from 2024/25 is expected to increase from \$383 million to \$577 million by Budget 2027/28 due to “increased Site C and G.M. Shrum dam power generation as well as inflation impacting future waterpower rental rates” (see Figure 7).⁴¹

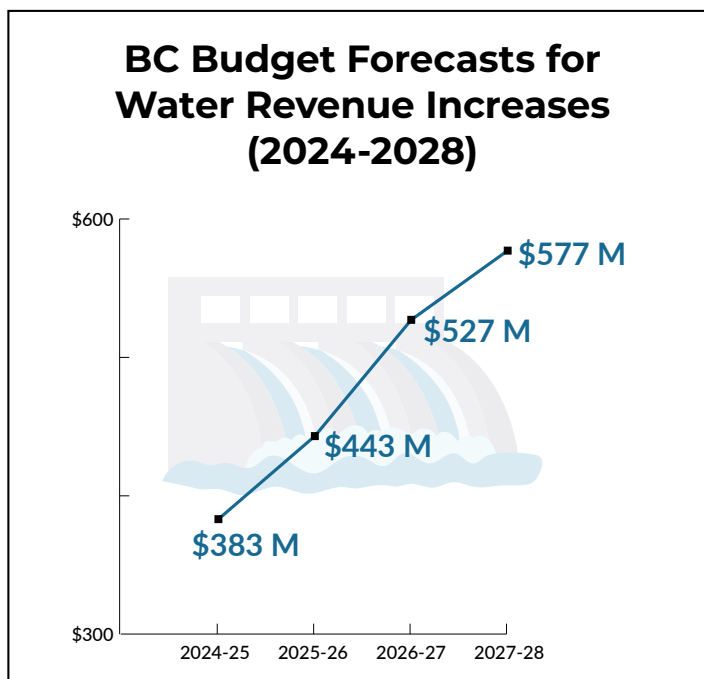


Figure 7: Projected water rental revenue increases 2024/25 to 2026/27; Source: BC Budget 2025

Water rental rates for hydropower

Water fees for diversion by hydropower are calculated differently from other users and are set under the *Annual Water Licence Rental Rates Associated With Power Production*.⁴² There are three kinds of charges: a one-time **construction fee** during development, an annual **capacity fee** based on turbine size, and an **output fee** tied to the volume of water used for power generation.⁴³ Larger hydropower facilities are charged higher output fees than smaller or private projects.

Example:

At today's water rental rates, Site C pays an estimated \$6 million every year in 'capacity fees' based on the size of its water intake and turbines, which can produce up to 1,100 megawatts of power.⁴⁴ When running at full power, Site C produces about 5.1 million megawatt hours of electricity annually.⁴⁵ For this production Site C would pay approximately \$39 million in output fees. Together, this adds up to an estimated \$45 million per year in water rental fees.

FIXING DISCONNECT #1:

Reinvest hydropower water revenue into BC's watersheds

Hydropower depends on healthy, functioning watersheds. When watersheds are degraded—by drought, deforestation, or poorly planned development—streamflows become less predictable, and power generation becomes more vulnerable. In recent years, BC—a province that relies almost entirely on hydropower to meet its electricity demands—has experienced reduced hydropower output during drought seasons.⁴⁶ These shortfalls not only threaten grid stability and energy revenue but also force the province to import electricity from other jurisdictions, which is often generated using more carbon-intensive, less sustainable sources.⁴⁷

Healthy watersheds are critical natural infrastructure for power generation: they store water in soils, wetlands, and forests, and release it gradually, supporting consistent river flows essential for hydropower operations large and small. At the same time, the construction and operation of dams can have major downstream impacts on watershed ecosystems and communities by altering natural flow patterns, changing water temperatures, disrupting fish and wildlife habitats—further reinforcing the need for strong, ongoing stewardship.⁴⁸

Reinvesting even a portion of BC's growing hydropower water rental revenues into watershed security would strengthen long-term energy reliability while reducing environmental risk. It would reflect the true value of water as a public resource and help safeguard the very ecosystems that power BC's clean electricity system.



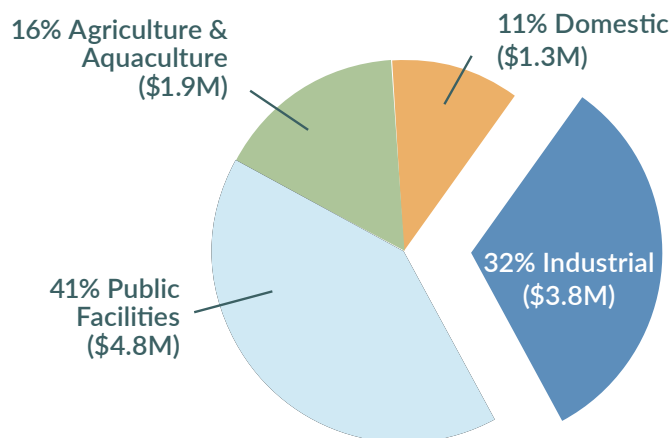
DISCONNECT #2

GIVING WATER AWAY TO THE LARGEST INDUSTRIAL USERS

Of the 3% water rental revenue that comes from non-power licences, Figure 8 breaks down this small share into its four distinct sectors: industrial (32%), public facilities (i.e. municipalities, conservation, etc.) (41%), agriculture and aquaculture (16%), and domestic use (11%).⁴⁹

This report focuses on industrial water users. Recognizing the importance of food security, public services, and household affordability, the following analysis and recommendations do not apply to agriculture, public facilities, and domestic use.

Water Licence Revenue by Purpose Use



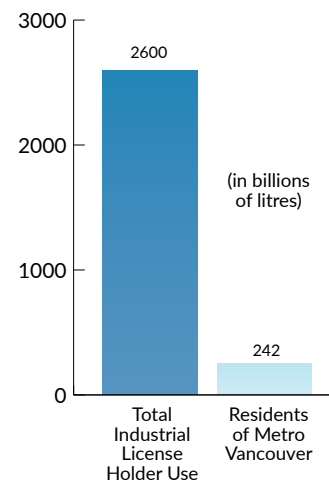
Note: These percentages assume full use of their licences by Pulp & Paper Mills and Local Providers, who have different rates to other users based on actual versus licensed use, with actual use not publicly disclosed.

Figure 8: Percentage of total water licence revenue by purpose use category.

Industry Licensed to Use 2.6 Trillion Litres of Water/Year

Based on publicly available water licence data from the BC government's Data Catalogue, industrial users such as mining operations and oil and gas companies are authorized to draw an estimated 2.6 trillion litres of water each year.⁵⁰

For perspective, 2.6 trillion litres is the same as the annual domestic water use of 27 million people, almost 5 times the population of BC.⁵¹ The bar graph shows how industrial water use in BC compares to residential use in Metro Vancouver—only 9% of the licenced amount for industry.⁵²



Industry pays a maximum of \$2.25 per million litres

BC's water rates are established under the *Water Sustainability Fees, Rentals and Charges Tariff Regulation*, which sets different rates based on categories of what that water is being for, such as for agriculture, domestic use, conservation and industrial water use.⁵³ These rates are summarized in Table 1.

WATER USE PURPOSE	WATER RENTALS RATE (\$ per million litres)
Domestic	\$2.25
Agriculture/Aquaculture	\$0.11-0.85
Public Facilities	\$2.25
Industrial Water Use	\$1.3-2.25

Table 1: Table showing a summary of domestic, agriculture, public facilities and industrial rates. Source: Water Sustainability Fees, Rentals and Charges Tariff Regulation.

When it comes to industrial water use specifically—not including agriculture, domestic use, or public facilities—the maximum rate an industrial water user can pay is \$2.25 million litres per year. As shown in Table 2, many industrial users pay less than this amount. Across the different industry categories, industrial water users pay an average of just \$1.60 per million litres of water. Appendix B provides a detailed list of the water licence purpose uses that are considered industrial in this analysis.

INDUSTRIAL WATER USE	WATER RENTALS RATE (\$ per million litres)
Mining	\$1.30-2.25
Oil & Gas	\$0-2.25
Water Bottling	\$2.25
Processing & Manufacturing	\$2.25
Ice & Snow Making	\$2.25
Pulp & Paper	\$0.85-1.30

Table 2: Table showing a breakdown of some of the major industrial uses and rates. Source: Water Sustainability Fees, Rentals and Charges Tariff Regulation.

Together, the 10 largest industrial water users in BC pay less than \$900,000 for access to over 500 billion litres of water annually—that's the same as all of the residents of Vancouver leaving their taps running for over 4 months.

(See Appendix C for a breakdown of the 10 largest users)

Failing to Meet Its Own Principles

In 2014, when BC last reviewed water rental rates, it set out clear principles to guide the establishment of new rates:^{54,55}

- Fairness and equity — sharing water management costs fairly among users based on use, location, and scarcity;
- Cost recovery — ensuring water fees generate enough revenue to sustainably manage the resource and implement the *Water Sustainability Act*;
- Support for food security and conservation — keeping rates low for agriculture and conservation uses.

Today, these principles are clearly not being met by the current water rental system—especially cost recovery. As outlined in Section 2, local and provincial capacity to manage fresh water is severely under-resourced, and many provisions in the *Water Sustainability Act* remain incomplete or largely unimplemented.

BC's industrial water rates are far lower than other provinces

BC charges by far the lowest rates for industrial water use in Canada when compared to provinces with similar licensing systems. Figure 9 shows rates in four provinces, including both the lowest and highest charges per million litres. Figures 10 and 11 show how many times larger the water rates are in other provinces. Appendix D includes more information on the water rates systems in these provinces.^{56, 57, 58, 59}

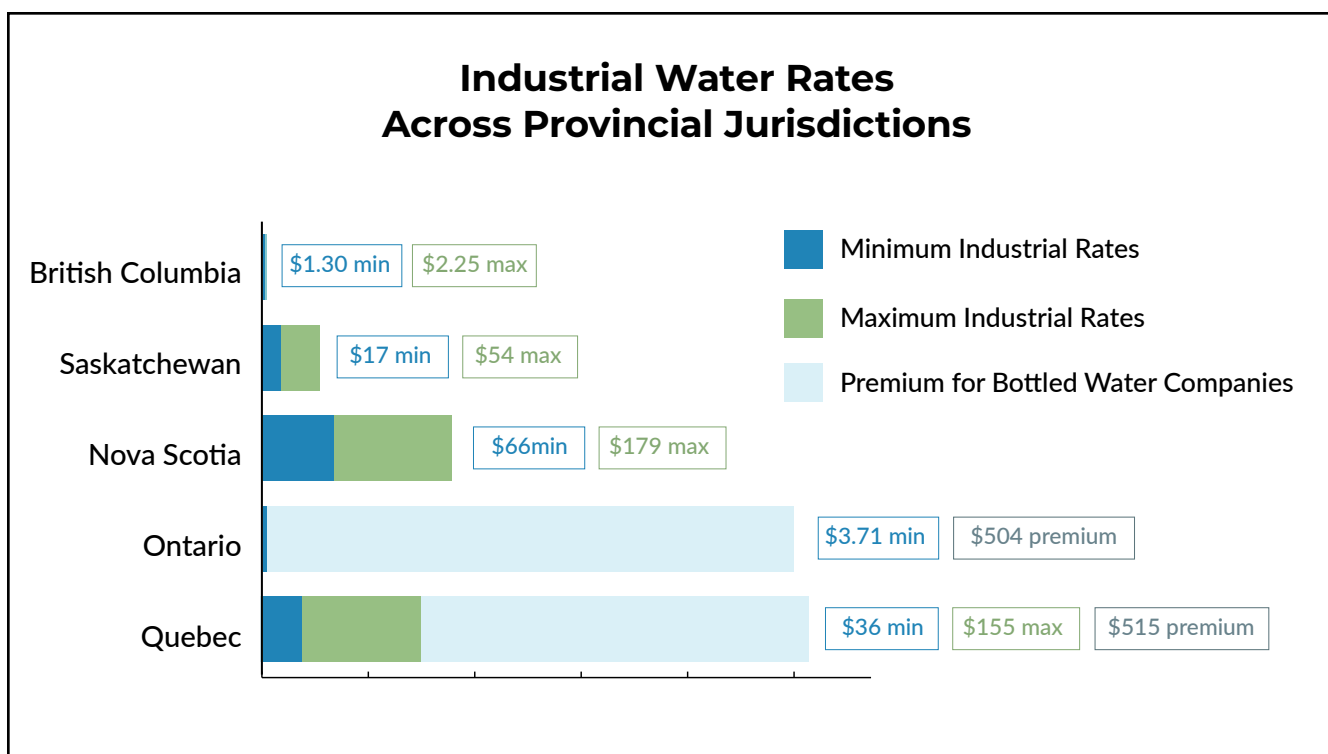


Figure 9: Provincial industrial water rates per million litres in BC, SK, NS, ON & QC.

HOW BC COMPARES TO OTHER PROVINCES

MINIMUM

INDUSTRIAL WATER RATES

Multiples are relative to BC's minimum water rate of \$1.30

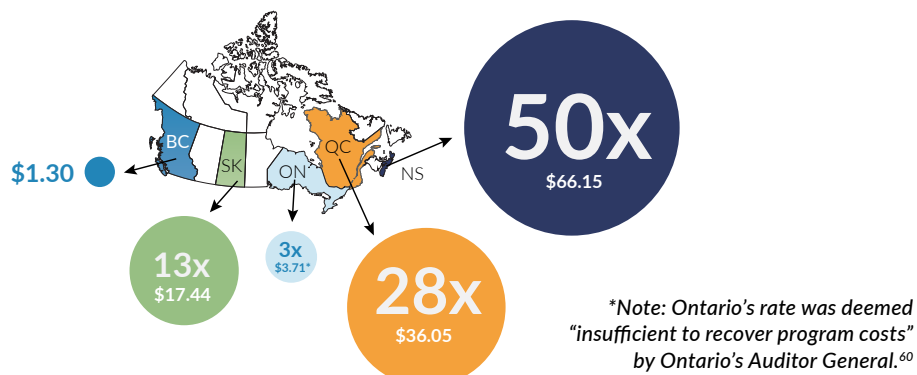


Figure 10

MAXIMUM

INDUSTRIAL WATER RATES

Multiples are relative to BC's maximum water rate of \$2.25

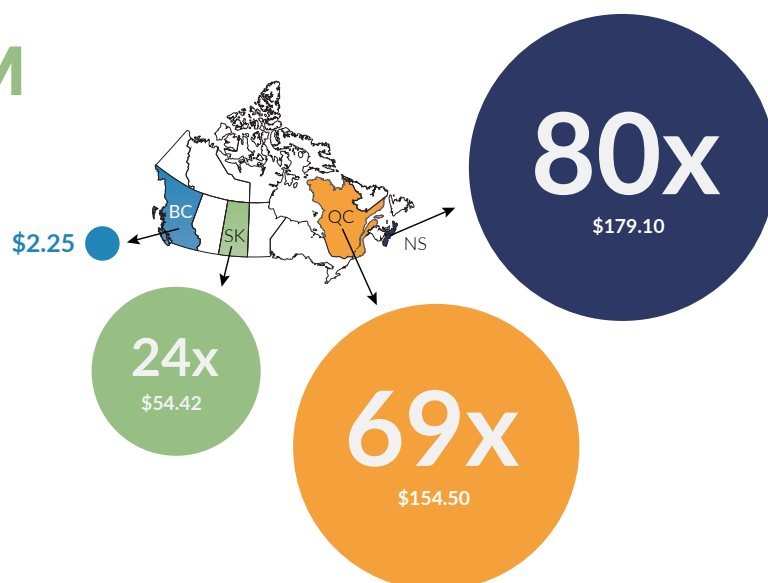
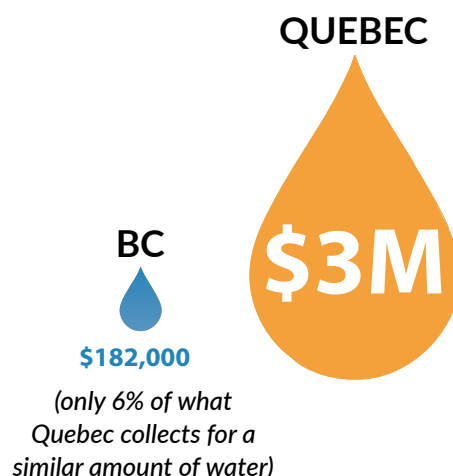


Figure 11

Case Study: Rio Tinto

Rio Tinto, a global mining and metals corporation, highlights the scale of the gap between BC and Quebec. The company is licensed to use about **81 billion litres of water annually in BC**, compared to **72.5 billion litres in Quebec**. Despite similar water volumes—based on the differing water rates in these provinces—Quebec collects **\$3 million** each year, while BC collects just **\$182,000**, only 6% of Quebec's total. For a company with a **\$16 billion net profit in 2024**, paying Quebec-level rates in BC would equal just **0.02% of annual profit**.⁶¹



FIXING DISCONNECT #2:

Modernize Industrial Water Rates

BC's current industrial water rates are rooted in a time when water was seen as limitless and giving it away to major industries raised little concern. But that myth of abundance has been shattered. Today, BC faces a stark new reality: multi-year droughts, rising tensions over water use, and declining watershed health. The risks to BC's economy and its communities are now very real.

By modernizing these outdated rates, BC can ensure major industries—like mining, LNG, and water bottling—pay their fair share for using this vital public resource while contributing to the costs of strengthening the water management systems that both industry and British Columbians rely on.

Aligning BC's rates with those in other provinces would help generate much needed funding to protect and manage our water—without putting the burden on households, farmers, small businesses, or local communities.

Figure 12 shares revenue projections for BC based on the application of just the minimum rates in other jurisdictions. This conservative analysis is based on publicly available provincial water licence data and assumes that all industrial water users would be charged a uniform rate.

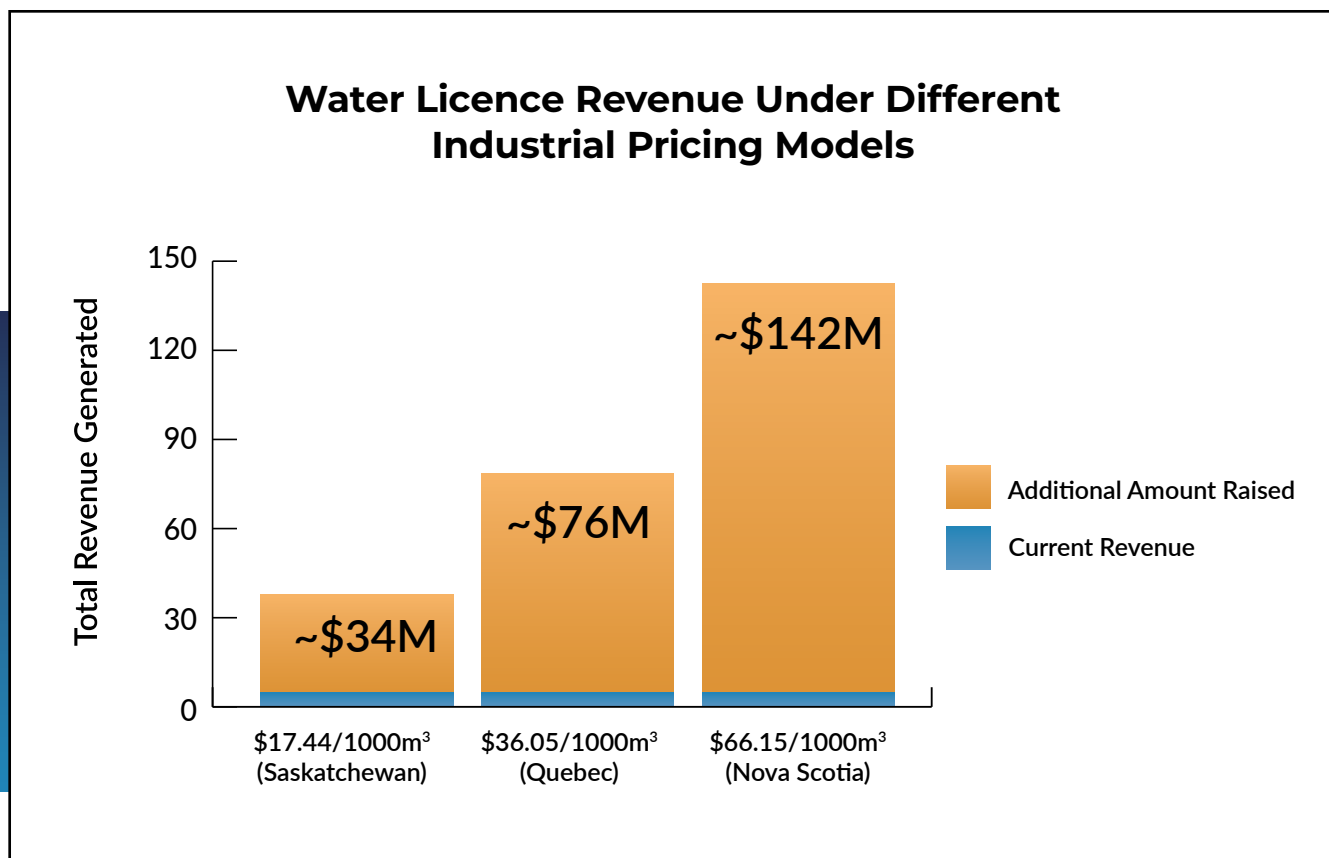


Figure 12: Potential annual revenue for BC by matching industrial water rates in other provinces (including the \$3.8 million in current industrial water rental revenue in BC).

Matching BC's industrial water rates to other provinces could generate between \$34 million and \$142 million in new revenue for watershed security:

- **Saskatchewan's minimum rate (\$17.44 per million litres):**⁶² BC would generate an estimated \$34 million.
- **Quebec's minimum rate (\$36.05 per million litres):**⁶³ BC could generate approximately \$76 million in revenue.
- **Nova Scotia's minimum rate (\$66.15 per million litres):**⁶⁴ BC would generate more than \$142 million in new revenue annually.

Ensuring No Impact on Farmers, Households or Small Businesses

These rate modernization scenarios apply only to large industrial water users—they would have no impact on farmers, municipalities, or domestic users.

The vast majority (70–80%) of small businesses would also see no change. Most commercial water licence holders currently pay a flat minimum annual water fee of \$200. Even if BC adopted higher industrial water rates in line with other provinces, the small volumes used by these businesses mean their calculated fees would still fall below that \$200 minimum.

To further protect small businesses, BC could introduce a water use threshold, below which commercial users would remain exempt from higher rates—similar to Quebec's exemption for operations using less than 50,000 litres per day.⁶⁵

These changes would ensure that medium and large-scale industrial users—those drawing hundreds of millions or tens of billions of litres—contribute more, while everyday British Columbians, local governments, farms, and small businesses remain protected.



4

RECOMMENDATIONS

Closing the Gap

Momentum for watershed security has been building—driven by First Nations, Mayors, farmers, stewardship organizations, and innovative businesses—but the capacity to plan, manage, and restore watersheds is declining just as the pressures are accelerating. The risks are no longer theoretical. Without healthy watersheds, BC faces serious consequences for food security, public health, housing, tourism, emergency preparedness, and local economies.

By moving forward on the following recommendations, the Province can demonstrate it is serious about securing the health of our watersheds, supporting local economies, and building climate resilience for generations to come.

RECOMMENDATION #1:

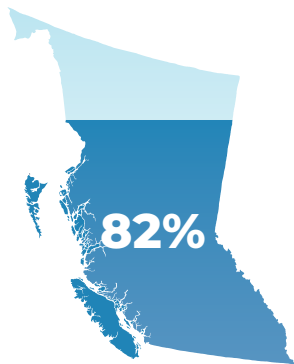
GENERATE NEW REVENUE BY MODERNIZING INDUSTRIAL WATER RATES

There are two clear and immediate opportunities to generate new public revenue from existing water uses, which should be accompanied by a commitment to regularly reviewing these rates.

a. Modernize Industrial Water Rates to Match the Value of Water

BC's largest industrial water users, such as mines, oil and gas operators, and bottled water companies, are paying far less than their counterparts in other provinces for access to public water. These deeply discounted rates fail to reflect the true value of water or the costs of managing it.

Modernize BC's industrial water rates by aligning with Quebec's rates as a minimum benchmark and aiming for national leadership in valuing water. This could unlock at least \$75 million in new annual revenue to build BC's watershed workforce.



82% of British Columbians support higher industrial fees to restore watersheds.

A POPULAR SOLUTION

82% of British Columbians support higher industrial fees to restore watersheds. A majority want these funds reinvested in local watershed initiatives through a scaled-up Watershed Security Fund.⁶⁶ (McAllister/Research Co. Poll, 2024)

In the 2026 *Budget Consultation Report*, the BC Standing Committee on Finance recommended that the province “review water rental rates and the portion of these rates being dedicated to strengthening water management, including drinking water protection and watershed monitoring.”⁶⁷

b. Reinvest Growing Hydropower Revenues in Watershed Health

Hydropower generates 97% of BC’s water rental revenue—yet none of that funding is reinvested into the watersheds that make this clean energy possible. With new hydro generation coming online, BC is poised to collect nearly \$200 million in additional water rental revenue between Budget 2024/25 and 2027/28.⁶⁸

Reinvest at least 20% of annual water revenue growth from hydropower back into watersheds, creating a self-sustaining stream of approximately \$40 million per year for watershed security.

c. Commit to a Regular Review of Water Rental Rates

BC’s industrial water rates haven’t been reviewed in over a decade. Going forward, regular reviews of the water rental system are essential to ensure the province is recovering the full cost of managing and protecting our water. Rates should be indexed to the Consumer Price Index to ensure rates keep pace with inflation.

Establish an independent expert panel to review industrial water rates every three years based on best practices in water pricing. Apply the Consumer Price Index to water rental rates on an annual basis.

RECOMMENDATION #2:

DEDICATE NEW WATER REVENUE TO WATERSHED SECURITY

New revenues from water rentals should be reinvested in clear, measurable priorities that support community health, economic resilience, and watershed security:

a. Scale Up the BC Watershed Security Fund

The BC Watershed Security Fund is a permanent, co-governed fund with First Nations, dedicated to protecting and restoring BC's watersheds.⁶⁹ While it has laid a strong foundation for long-term investment in local solutions, the Fund remains significantly under-resourced — granting just \$3–5 million annually, leaving many shovel-ready projects unfunded.⁷⁰

Allocate \$75 million annually to the BC Watershed Security Fund to create thousands of jobs in the watershed workforce, strengthen Indigenous and rural economies, and sustain the watersheds that underpin BC's long-term prosperity.

Examples of Funds with Dedicated Government Revenue

Quebec's Blue Fund

Quebec has recognized the importance of directing new water revenues to improving watershed health. Before it increased its industrial water rates, Quebec collected about \$3 million annually from industrial water users.⁷¹ Now, annual revenue has increased to over \$30 million⁷² and these funds are being directed to the Blue Fund, which invests in projects that protect and restore Quebec's watersheds.⁷³

BC's Habitat Conservation Trust Fund

In BC, a similar approach has been taken with the Habitat Conservation Trust Fund, which is supported by hunting, fishing, and trapping licence fees.⁷⁴ These user-pay contributions are reinvested into habitat protection, restoration, and stewardship projects across the province. A modernized water rental system can follow the same model—ensuring that revenue from industrial water users is reinvested directly into the BC Watershed Security Fund.

b. Establish and Fund Local Watershed Boards

Local watershed boards are a missing piece of BC's water governance puzzle. These collaborative, place-based bodies deliver targeted community-driven solutions, reduce conflict, and ensure decisions reflect local priorities. The Cowichan Watershed Board, co-led by Cowichan Tribes and the Cowichan Valley Regional District, shows how this model can align leadership and deliver real results for people, watersheds and regional economies.⁷⁵

Invest at least \$10 million annually to resource a province-wide system of Local Watershed Boards to coordinate watershed planning, share data, manage water use, and respond rapidly to droughts and floods.

c. Strengthen Frontline Provincial Capacity

Despite the *Water Sustainability Act's* 2016 promise of modern watershed management, limited provincial capacity has stalled progress and many key tools in the Act remain incomplete or unimplemented.⁷⁶ A promised *Watershed Security Strategy*, co-developed with First Nations, has never been released. Local communities need consistent, efficient, and competent support from the Province to implement solutions in their watersheds.

Strengthen provincial capacity on-the-ground by hiring regional water staff to work with First Nations, local governments, and local watershed boards, to implement provincial water management tools.

5

CONCLUSION

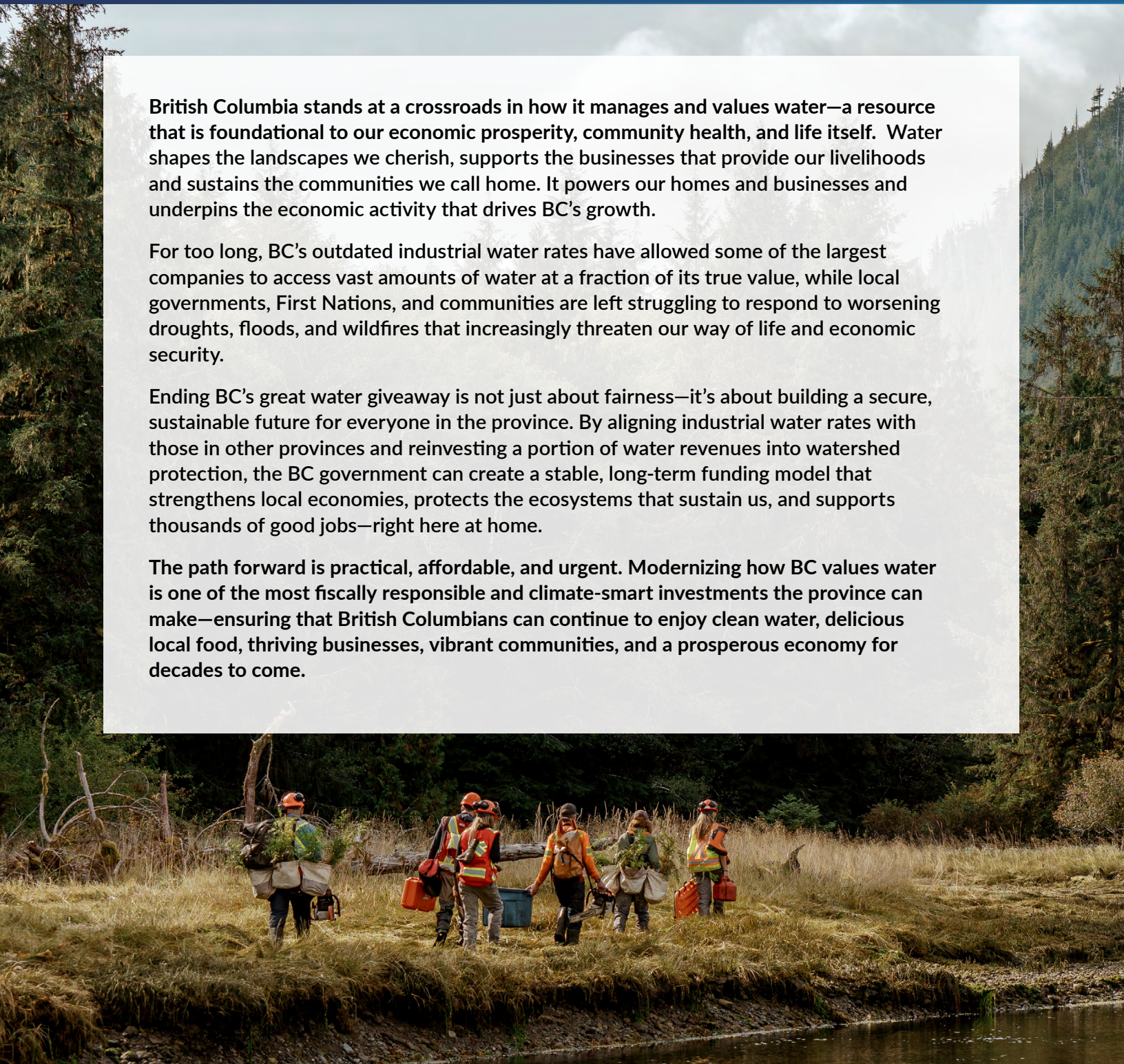
The Case for Action

British Columbia stands at a crossroads in how it manages and values water—a resource that is foundational to our economic prosperity, community health, and life itself. Water shapes the landscapes we cherish, supports the businesses that provide our livelihoods and sustains the communities we call home. It powers our homes and businesses and underpins the economic activity that drives BC's growth.

For too long, BC's outdated industrial water rates have allowed some of the largest companies to access vast amounts of water at a fraction of its true value, while local governments, First Nations, and communities are left struggling to respond to worsening droughts, floods, and wildfires that increasingly threaten our way of life and economic security.

Ending BC's great water giveaway is not just about fairness—it's about building a secure, sustainable future for everyone in the province. By aligning industrial water rates with those in other provinces and reinvesting a portion of water revenues into watershed protection, the BC government can create a stable, long-term funding model that strengthens local economies, protects the ecosystems that sustain us, and supports thousands of good jobs—right here at home.

The path forward is practical, affordable, and urgent. Modernizing how BC values water is one of the most fiscally responsible and climate-smart investments the province can make—ensuring that British Columbians can continue to enjoy clean water, delicious local food, thriving businesses, vibrant communities, and a prosperous economy for decades to come.



Appendices

Appendix A:

Methodology for Calculating Water Licence Revenues

This appendix outlines the methodology used to calculate annual water licence revenues in British Columbia. It explains how provincial water licence data was collected, cleaned, standardized, and analyzed to estimate licensed volumes and associated water rental payments across different purposes of use.

1. **Data Collection:** All water licence records were downloaded from the [provincial water licence database](#). Only licences with a status of current were retained for analysis.
2. **Data Cleaning:** Duplicate entries were removed. Duplicates occur when a single licence lists multiple licence holders or points of diversion, which are displayed as separate rows in the dataset.
3. **Standardization and Rate Application:** All licensed water volumes were converted into cubic metres per year. Rates were then applied on the basis of the licence purpose, consistent with the categories and rates set under the *Water Sustainability Act*. This step produced annual water use and payment amounts for each licence.
4. **Aggregation by Purpose:** Water use and associated revenues were summed by licence purpose to capture total annual volumes and payments generated across each use category.

Pulp mills and local waterworks pay water rental fees based on actual use rather than their licensed volume and detailed figures for their actual use are not publicly available. Because detailed information on their actual usage is not publicly available, we have assumed for this analysis that they use the full volume allowed under their licence.

Non-power revenue was calculated using the methodology described above. Power revenue was estimated by subtracting the non-power revenue from the total water rental revenue identified in BC Budget 2025, excluding licences for conservation and land improvement purposes.

Appendix B:

Purpose Uses Considered 'Industrial'

Water licence purpose uses indicate the specific ways in which licensed water may be used, as defined under the *Water Sustainability Act*. This appendix lists the water licence purpose uses that have been categorized as industrial in our analysis, along with other relevant purpose use categories.

Purpose Use	Category
Domestic: Domestic (WSA01), Incidental Domestic	Domestic
Marine Transport	Industrial
Camps and Public Facilities: Church/Community Hall, Institutions, Non-Work Camps, Public Facility, General, Exhibition Grounds & Work Camps	Public Facilities
Commercial Enterprises	Industrial
Freshwater Bottling	Industrial
Greenhouse and Nursery	Agriculture & Aquaculture
Cooling, Heat Exchanger (Industrial)	Industrial
Heat Exchange (Residential)	Domestic
Ice and Snow Making	Industrial
Lawn, Garden, Fairway	Agriculture & Aquaculture
Livestock and Animal: Game Farm, Kennel, Stockwatering, General	Agriculture & Aquaculture
Miscellaneous Industrial: Dewatering, Fire Protection, Overburden Disposal, Sediment Control, General	Industrial
Pond and Aquaculture	Agriculture & Aquaculture
Processing and Manufacturing: Fire Prevention, Processing, Wharves, General	Industrial
Pulp Mill	Industrial
Swimming Pools	Public Facilities
Vehicles and Equipment: Brake Cooling, Mine & Quarry, Truck & Equipment Wash, General	Industrial
Industrial Waste Management: Effluent, Garbage Dump, Sewage Disposal	Industrial
Transport Management: Dust Control, Road Maintenance, Well Drilling/Transport	Industrial
Irrigation: Local Provider, Private	Agriculture & Aquaculture
Mineralized Water: Commercial Pool, Bottling & Distribution	Industrial
Mining: Hydraulic, Placer, Processing Ore, Washing Coal	Industrial
Oil & Gas: Field Injection (non-deep groundwater), Hydraulic Fracturing (non-deep groundwater), Drilling	Industrial
Water Works: Local Provider, Other than Local Provider, Sales, Water Delivery	Public Facilities

Appendix C:

Top 10 Largest Industrial Water Users

The table below lists the top ten industrial water users in British Columbia by licensed or authorized water volume. It also shows the estimated annual water rental fees for these licence holders, calculated using publicly available data and the provincial water rates for their purpose uses, following the process outlined in Appendix A.

Note: Pulp and paper licences are charged only for actual use, not their water licence allocation, and this data is not public. To avoid speculation, they have been excluded from this table.

Company Name	Type	Authorized Water Use (L/year)	Water Fees/year
Northriver Midstream Operations GP	Oil & Gas	107,439,993,000	\$114,955
Teck Metals Ltd. (Trail)	Mining	84,599,066,000	\$190,991
Rio Tinto Alcan Inc.	Mining	81,024,635,000	\$182,924
EVR Fording River Operations	Mining	56,972,704,000	\$70,578
Teck Highland Valley Copper Corp	Mining	55,743,575,000	\$125,764
EVR Elkview Operations	Mining	37,481,432,000	\$16,052
Thompson Creek Metals Company	Mining	34,718,339,000	\$77,177
Woodfibre LNG General Partner	Oil & Gas	23,218,064,000	\$30,183
Capital Power Generation Services	Energy	17,859,085,000	\$23,216
Newcrest Red Chris Mining Ltd.	Mining	13,460,259,000	\$30,418
TOTAL:		512,517,156,000	\$862,262

Appendix D:

Jurisdictional Scan: Industrial Water Rate Systems in Other Provinces

Each jurisdiction has taken different steps to update or differentiate rates based on water source, quality, volume, or type of use, offering practical models that BC could adapt to reflect the true value of water and the cost of managing it.

Quebec

In 2024, Quebec made major changes to its industrial water licence system. Before this date, the province charged a small fee of \$2.50 per million litres for most industrial water use but under the new system, companies that use water but return most of it to the environment saw their rates increase to \$35 per million litres.⁷⁷ Businesses that incorporate water into their final products, such as cement manufacturers, pesticide producers, and oil and gas extractors, had their rates raised to \$150 per million litres and bottled water producers now face the highest fees set at \$500 per million litres.⁷⁸ These rates are tied to CPI, so they grow every year. Water users withdrawing less than 50,000 litres per day are not charged under this system.

Ontario:

In 2017, Ontario dramatically increased fees for water bottling companies. Previously, these operations paid the standard industrial rate of \$3.71 per million litres, but effective August 1, 2017, bottlers were charged \$503.71 per million litres, reflecting public concern over large-scale water extraction.⁷⁹ At the same time, the province implemented a moratorium on all new and expanded permits for groundwater withdrawals for bottling, effective until January 1, 2019.⁸⁰ Ontario's Auditor General has deemed the standard rate of \$3.71 as "insufficient to recover program costs" in the province.⁸¹

Saskatchewan

Over 90% of industrial water users in Saskatchewan pay the standard rate of \$17.44 per million litres, which applies to most surface and shallow groundwater sources, while temporary industrial users pay a flat rate of \$17.70 regardless of the water source.⁸² Higher rates apply when water is taken from major sources such as the South Saskatchewan River or Lake Diefenbaker, at \$54.52 per million litres.⁸³ A lower rate of \$2.20 per million litres applies when the water quality is low, meaning it has more than 4,000 mg/L of total dissolved solids.⁸⁴ However, since this water is unsuitable for most industrial uses, very few users qualify for this lower rate.

Nova Scotia

Nova Scotia uses a tiered fee system that charges annual water use fees based on the amount of water a user is approved to withdraw each day. The minimum annual fee is \$66.15, but once a user is approved to take more than one million litres per day, the cost increases in tiers depending on volume up to a maximum of \$179.10 per million litres.⁸⁵ Industrial, municipal, domestic, and recreational users fall under this system, while agricultural, conservation, and beautification uses are exempt.⁸⁶ Fish farming operations pay reduced rates, and hydropower users are charged based on the size of their infrastructure.⁸⁷

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The BC Watershed Security Coalition is a non-partisan, diverse coalition of 57 organizations made up of community water experts and leaders in the field, including farmers, Indigenous champions and local governments, and represents 285,000 British Columbians from all walks of life.

If your organization is interested in joining the Coalition,
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