

WHEREAS the small water systems in rural British Columbia, which are administered by local governments, provide essential services to rural residents and communities, yet they face unsustainable financial burdens due to the high costs of water treatment systems, ongoing maintenance, and replacing aging infrastructure, which can amount to millions of dollars;

AND WHEREAS it is not possible for rural residents and communities to finance these systems through local taxation alone, threatening the viability of these water systems and the communities they serve, while also posing a significant risk to local food security;

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the Union of BC Municipalities request the provincial and federal governments to establish long-term sustainable funding programs specifically for small water systems to address high cost and regulatory compliance requirements and to safeguard local food security, and for a collaborative approach to funding and support, including cost-sharing models, grant programs and capacity-building initiatives, to enable small rural water systems to remain viable and resilient amidst growing environmental and economic pressures.

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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Small water systems in rural British Columbia (defined by the *Provincial Drinking Water Protection Act* regulations as serving fewer than 500 individuals per day) are vital to the sustainability of the communities they serve, providing drinking water for residents, supporting agriculture, and maintaining local ecosystems. These systems, which are administered by local governments, serve limited numbers of homes but face extraordinary costs for upgrades, maintenance, and meeting regulatory compliance. These expenses often total millions of dollars, far exceeding the financial capacity of a small group of rural taxpayers to support.

Challenges Faced by Small Water Systems

1. **Food Security Risks:** Many rural areas with small water systems play a critical role in British Columbia's food production. Without adequate water infrastructure in rural areas, agricultural activities may be compromised, which would exacerbate food security challenges. Food security is a priority for the Province, as was evidenced by its inclusion in the January 16, 2025 mandate letters to the Minister of Agriculture and Food, and the Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction. To ensure food security, rural water infrastructure must also become a priority.
2. **Aging Infrastructure:** Many small water systems were constructed decades ago and require significant upgrades or replacements to meet current standards and ensure reliability.
3. **High Filtration and Treatment Costs:** Provincial and federal regulations often mandate advanced filtration and treatment systems to ensure water quality, placing additional financial strain on small systems.
4. **Maintenance and Operational Costs:** Ongoing operational and maintenance costs are disproportionately high for small systems due to their limited user base and economies of scale.
5. **Lack of Sustainable Funding:** Current funding mechanisms do not provide long-term or predictable support, leaving small water systems vulnerable to financial instability and service disruptions.

Previous Resolutions and Need for Enhanced Advocacy

While the UBCM membership has endorsed similar resolutions in the past, the financial challenges for small water systems continue to escalate, underscoring the need for a stronger commitment to long-term sustainable funding. We need to prioritize food security as the reasoning behind the push for secure, sustainable small water systems. Existing funding programs often provide short-term or one-time grants, which do not address the systemic and ongoing nature of the challenges faced.

Proposed Solution

This resolution calls for:

- **Dedicated Long-Term Funding:** Establishment of predictable, sustainable funding programs to support capital upgrades, compliance with regulatory standards, and ongoing operational costs. (this is probably a federal ask)

- **Collaborative Approaches:** Cost-sharing models and grant programs that involve provincial and federal governments to alleviate the financial burden on rural residents and communities.
- **Capacity-Building Support:** Programs to assist Regional Districts with technical expertise, planning, and resource management.

Conclusion

Small water systems are instrumental to rural communities in BC and the rest of Canada. Without significant and sustained funding, these systems will fail, compromising access to safe drinking water, lessening food security by threatening agricultural productivity, and weakening the resilience of rural areas. By adopting this resolution, UBCM can lead the call for equitable and sustainable solutions to preserve rural water systems, benefiting all British Columbians and strengthening BC's food security.

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