

# 2024 Urban Municipal Water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity Plan



 **Alberta  
Municipalities**  
Strength  
In Members

Targets and Actions for the Urban Municipal Sector



# Executive Summary

Building upon the direction set out in the Water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity Plan of 2014, this renewed plan reflects that Alberta Municipalities member municipalities<sup>1</sup> is recognized as a significant contributor to safeguarding the reliability of our water supplies, the stewardship of our aquatic ecosystems, and the health and well-being of Albertans, as set out in the provincial Water for Life Strategy.

The renewed plan proposes an outcomes-based approach to achieving water savings. The inclusion of volume-based water use and water loss targets further enables measuring and reporting of the urban municipal sector's contributions toward achieving the goals of the province's Water for Life Strategy (i.e., safe secure drinking water; healthy aquatic ecosystems; and reliable, quality water supplies for a sustainable economy).

Targets of the renewed ABmunis plan are:

- 1) Alberta's urban municipal sector will achieve an average per capita residential water use of 170 litres/person/day (l/c/d) or a 10% reduction from current residential water usage - whichever is lower - by 2027. The previous goal was 195 litres/person/day.
- 2) Alberta's urban municipal sector will achieve a total per capita water use of 307 litres/person/day (l/c/d) by 2027. The previous goal was 341 litres/person/day.
- 3) Alberta's urban municipal sector will maintain the volume of "unaccounted for" water at 10% of total water use and set a target Infrastructure Leakage Index (ILI) at 3.0 - 5.0.

In order to achieve these targets, the following actions are essential:

- 1) ABmunis member municipalities holding a water license(s) for municipal use will report water use data through the Government of Alberta's (GoA) Water Use Reporting System.
- 2) ABmunis member municipalities will continue to take action to increase water conservation by users, efficiency of water distribution systems, and productivity of water and wastewater treatment systems, so as to contribute to the sector collectively achieving its water use and water loss targets. This includes enhancing local water use and loss information and reporting, and municipal conservation and efficiency planning.
- 3) ABmunis will continue to advocate with the Government of Alberta and other organizations to develop tools and a standardized and accessible open data platform to assist municipalities in understanding and measuring their water use and losses, and improve conservation, efficiency and productivity in line with targets.
- 4) ABmunis will review and update the online tools and resources that accompany the Conservation and Efficiency Plan to continue supporting member municipalities in their efforts and actions.
- 5) ABmunis will collaborate with the Government of Alberta to better quantify and incorporate watershed and basin return flows from member municipalities, along with policy or initiatives that promote and support water reuse of various natures. Collaboration on water licenses and exploring the incorporation of return flows will also be explored.
- 6) ABmunis will advocate to the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada for the financial support to address aging water infrastructure in Alberta for the reduction of unaccounted for losses and the improvement and resilience of distribution systems.

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<sup>1</sup> The CEP plan only applies to municipalities' with municipal water systems. It does not apply to summer villages whose residents have individual wells, as it is not possible for the municipality to track water use in this case.

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# Introduction

## 1.0 Introduction

Water is expected to be an increasingly scarce resource given Alberta's rapid population and industrial growth, urbanization and increased density, limited availability of water supply in many regions, impacts of climate change, concerns over aquatic health, and escalating risk and cost associated with maintaining aging water systems. With the increasing risks of prolonged droughts and the failures of aging water distribution systems, ensuring a reliable supply of safe drinking water is becoming ever more critical for the long-term health and viability of our communities across the province.

Adopting a water conservation, efficiency, and productivity (CEP) plan that is based on accurate data is one the most effective means of managing demand within existing available supplies and contributing to long-term municipal sustainability and environmental stewardship. It is timely to renew the water conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity Plan that was originally prepared in 2009 and more recently updated in 2014 for the urban municipal sector.

Prior to the publication of the 2024 CEP Water Plan ABmunis conducted background research into international and local water conservation methodologies, metrics and context. A technical memorandum was prepared that summarizes current water demand and usage in Canada and explores how various jurisdictions around the world approach water conservation. This memorandum is included as an appendix to this Plan.

With this background context, ABmunis sought to confirm and in some cases update the targets for the CEP. Municipal leaders were engaged in conversation about water conservation, subregional contexts and challenges, and the feasibility of updated targets through the Spring Municipal Leaders' Caucus meetings in June of 2024. During these engagements, leaders were provided information about the CEP update, the opportunity to provide input to updated targets, and to identify key supports needed for their communities to achieve these targets.

The importance of water conservation and efficiency is apparent in many facets of community, from public health and levels of service to economic opportunities, agriculture and industry development. Effective water use and management by all users within municipal jurisdictions has financial, economic and environmental implications for member municipalities and underscores the importance of stewardship by member municipalities. Immediate implications such as utility rates and cost of water service directly impact members' ability to sustainably provide core services, but this also extends to longer term considerations such as aging infrastructure, asset management, sustainable development planning and servicing, and municipal impacts to the ecological health of local systems. By prioritizing efficient and non-wasteful water consumption practices, municipalities will reduce the long-term costs and risks associated with water procurement, infrastructure maintenance and service delivery with a focus on environmental and economic stability. Water licenses in Alberta will become increasingly limited in the coming years, and the conversation around water use and reuse will continue to be a critical topic for local communities and the province of Alberta as a whole.

The renewed CEP Plan presents a path forward based on the background research and extensive engagement and consultation with member municipalities. ABmunis Sustainability and Environment Committee has stewarded the renewal of this plan and provided valuable insights and guidance in its update.

# 2.0 Background on Water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity

The following initiatives and documents provide the contextual framework to support the role and alignment of ABmunis updated CEP plan.

## 2.1 National Adaption Strategy

The National Adaptation Strategy (NAS) is a comprehensive plan developed by the Government of Canada to address the impacts of climate change across the country. It was created to help communities, businesses, and governments at all levels prepare for and respond to the increasing risks associated with climate change, such as extreme weather events, rising sea levels, and shifting ecosystems. The strategy focuses on building resilience and reducing vulnerability in key areas, including infrastructure, public health, the natural environment, and the economy and contains relevant context for the updated CEP water plan.

## 2.2 Alberta Water Council – Water CEP Planning

As a key body monitoring progress toward the goals and outcomes of the Water for Life Strategy, the Alberta Water Council (AWC) developed 2008 recommendations for water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity (CEP) sector planning, identifying seven major water-using sectors in Alberta: irrigation, upstream oil and gas (including oil sands mining), downstream petroleum products, chemical producers, forestry, power generation, and the urban municipal sector. Together, these sectors account for most of the allocated water in Alberta and are tasked with building and reporting on their respective water CEP plans. Alberta Municipalities, a member of the AWC Board of Directors, plays a crucial role in advocating for urban municipalities on key water management issues. In October 2013, and again in 2015, ABmunis provided an interim report on the efforts and achievements of the urban municipal sector. The AWC, a multi-stakeholder partnership with 24 members from governments, industries, and non-government organizations, is instrumental in monitoring the implementation of Alberta's Water for Life strategy. Alberta Municipalities' ongoing partnership with the AWC has been pivotal in shaping ABmunis new CEP Plan, ensuring alignment with provincial water sustainability goals.

## 2.3 ABmunis 2014 Water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity Plan

In 2014, ABmunis members updated the CEP plan previously created in 2009. As a framework for future action, the plan identified a number of water conservation and efficiency actions to be implemented by urban municipalities and put forth three key indicators to track the success of these action items. These targets include residential water usage per capita, total water usage per capita and percent loss of water unaccounted for. The targets and the corresponding results as measured and reported in the Biennial Drinking Water Plants Survey are displayed on the following page in Table 1.

*From a municipal perspective, **water conservation** refers to a reduction in the total amount of water used by customers, while **water efficiency** refers to the amount of water being withdrawn from the source to satisfy a specific need. **Productivity** refers to what is done (or produced) with the water by the end-user.*

**Table 1 - 2014 CEP Targets and 2021 Results**

	2014 CEP Target	Actual (2021*)	Result
Residential water usage per capita (Lpcd)	195	195	Achieved
Total water usage per capita (Lcpd)	341	330	Achieved
“Unaccounted for” distribution losses (%)	10	15	Not Achieved

\*Statistics Canada. Table 38-10-0271-01 Potable water use by sector and average daily use

To assist municipalities ABmunis developed a suite of municipal water management tools housed at Water conservation | Alberta Municipalities (ABmunis.ca).

## 3.0 Measuring Municipal Water Use

Accurate water use information is one of the foundational elements that will help improve the management of Alberta's water resources. The ability to set meaningful water conservation and efficiency targets, and to measure progress toward the achievement of those targets, requires that municipalities have a thorough understanding of current water use.

All of this hinges on water withdrawal, demands, and releases being metered. Universal metering is common practice in most Alberta municipalities, but to effectively plan for and monitor progress toward water conservation and efficiency goals, the information collected needs to be used for more than just billing purposes.

There are a number of ways that a municipality can measure, monitor, and report its water use; the challenge is achieving some consistency in how this is done.

### 3.1 Overall Water Use

Water use (in the municipal context) refers to the gross diversion of water withdrawn from all licensed sources and introduced into the municipal system for use. It is important to note that although referred to as 'use', the volume withdrawn may not be entirely consumed and some portion of it may be subsequently returned to the environment after treatment.

The reporting of water use information by those who operate these utilities provides governments and the public with a better understanding of how water is being used in this province. Municipal water use data submitted to the provincial government's Water Use Reporting (WUR) System will be used to monitor overall water use volumes and trends and to report the urban municipal sector's contribution to achieving the GoA's target of a 30% improvement in overall water CEP from 2014 levels. The GOAs target for 30% improvement in conservation is highlighted in the renewed 2008, [Water for Life Action Plan](#).

### 3.2 Use of Municipal Water

According to the findings of Statistics Canada's most recent Biennial Drinking Water Plants Survey the residential sector accounts for the bulk of municipal water use (58%) in Alberta. The industrial/commercial sector follows with 24%, while wholesale water provided to other jurisdictions account for 3% of water used. The remaining 15% is that lost as a result of leakage and system flushing/maintenance.

The proportion of water used by the above noted sectors varies considerably from one municipality to the next. Typically, smaller communities tend to have less commercial and industrial water use, and so the residential sector accounts for a greater percentage of water use than in larger communities.

*For more than 10 years, all Water License holders report water use on a regular basis as a condition of that license by the provincial government.*

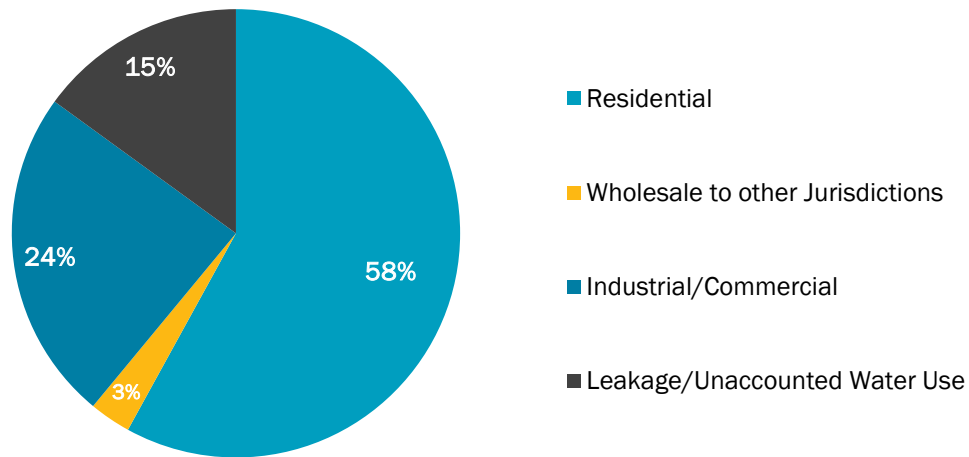
A water audit refers to an assessment of the integrity of the overall water distribution system. A water audit measures and tracks the flow of water from the site of withdrawal or treatment through the water distribution system and into customer properties. In doing so, it calculates the volumes and variety of consumption and losses that exist in the system. This information enables a municipality to determine the most effective and efficient course of action to mitigate losses and improve the overall efficiency of the system.

Further information on municipal water audits is available on ABmunis' website <https://www.abmunis.ca/advocacy-resources/environment/water-management/water-conservation>.



Understanding who is using what, and how that water is being used is important in identifying appropriate water conservation and efficiency measures for achieving water savings. This is the type of information that is derived from developing a municipal water use profile (an important early step in water CEP planning) or conducting a municipal water audit. To do so requires that a community be universally metered.

**Figure 1: Alberta's Municipal Water Use by Sector**  
(as a percentage of total water delivered to the distribution system)



Statistics Canada. Table 38-10-0271-01 Potable water use by sector and average daily use (2021)

### 3.3 Per Capita Water Use

One of the most common measurements for monitoring and reporting water use is total per capita water use. Total per capita water use, typically calculated on a per day basis, is simply the total volume of water delivered through the water distribution system divided by the municipality's population served and is presented in litres per capita per day (l/c/d). Although this measurement provides a general indication of the intensity of water usage in a municipality, it does not take into account the composition of the municipality in terms of its water-users. For example, a community that services a water-intensive industrial or commercial operation is likely to have a higher total per capita water usage than one that doesn't.

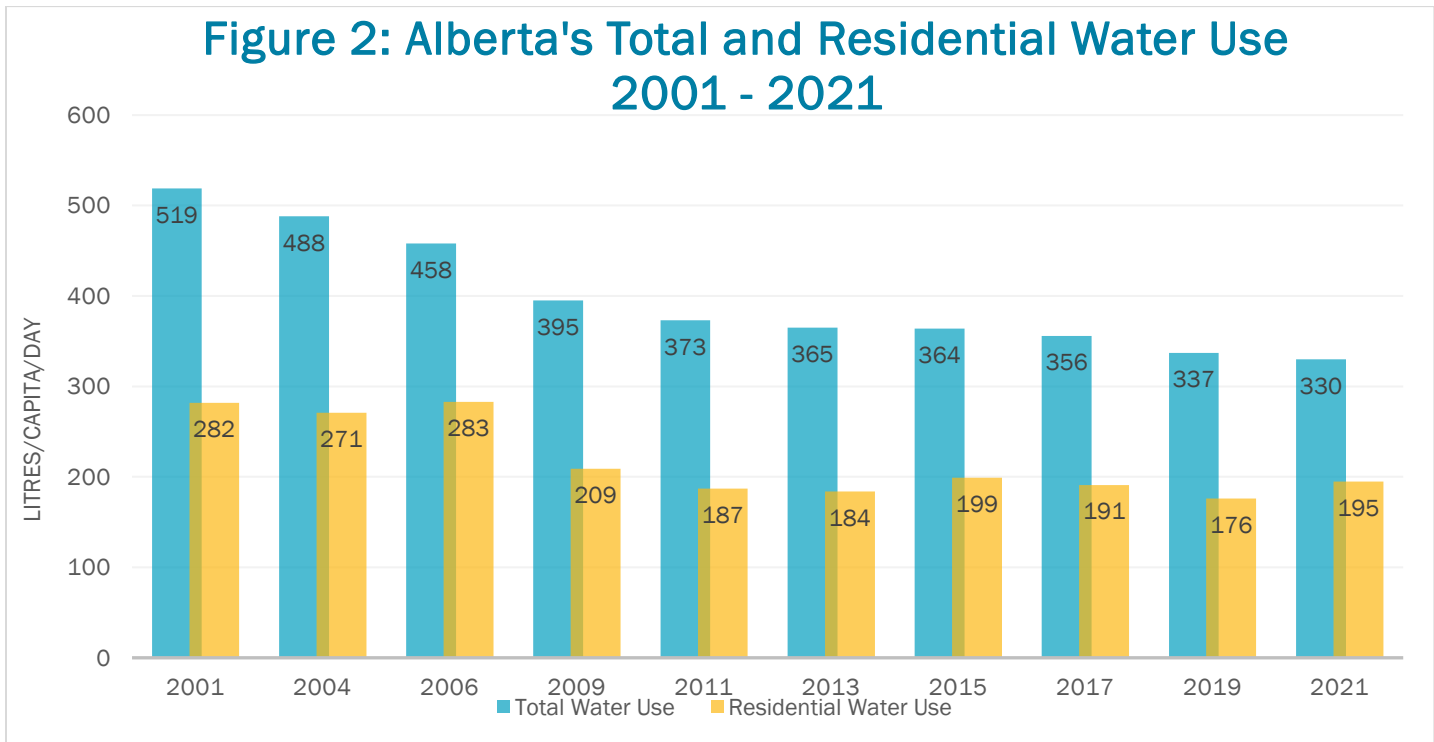
A more accepted measurement used as a basis for water use comparisons between communities, provinces, and even countries, is residential per capita water use. This measurement considers only the water usage of the residential sector, and thus captures an element common to every community. It is also the measurement typically used in establishing a water use benchmark to assess subsequent progress toward achieving water conservation and efficiency targets.

Consistency is important in the calculation of residential per capita water use – for example, to accurately reflect residential water use, the water use of multi-family residences should be included in residential sector calculations. At present, some municipalities consider these buildings as commercial users and do not include their water use in the residential per capital calculation.

In Alberta, total per capita water use in 2015 was 365 l/c/d, and residential water use 184 l/c/d. In comparison, the Canadian average for these same measures was 446 l/c/d and 234 l/c/d, respectively. Alberta's per capita water use was (and continues to be) well below the Canadian average – a reflection of the success of municipal programs and efforts to date and of the commitment of this province's water users to achieve water savings. Total and residential water use in Alberta from 2001 to 2021 are presented below in Figure 2.

In findings of Statistics Canada's 2021 Biennial Drinking Water Plants Survey reveal that of the provinces and territories, Nunavut, Manitoba, and Alberta have the lowest total water use per capita. Nunavut, Manitoba, Alberta, Ontario and PEI also have the lowest residential water use per capita. Total and residential water use in all provinces and territories from the 2021 reporting year are presented in Table 2.

Despite improvements in water conservation, Canadians have consistently ranked among the world's most profligate users of water, with per capita water use well above that of European and many other industrialized nations. Only the UAE and the United States have a higher per capita water consumption level (Water Footprint Calculator, 2023).



Source - Statistics Canada. Table 38-10-0271-01 Potable water use by sector and average daily use

**Table 2 - Total and Residential per Capita Water Use, by Province/Territory and Municipal Population**

	Total per capita water use (l/c/d)	Residential per capita water use (l/c/d)	Responding Population
Alberta	330	195	3,851,092
British Columbia	465	286	4,750,581
Manitoba	283	164	1,145,379
New Brunswick	432	243	449,992
Newfoundland and Labrador	709	402	447,759
Northwest Territories	361	204	39,814
Nova Scotia	370	220	620,042
Nunavut	234	144	36,380
Ontario	335	187	12,856,372
Prince Edward Island	365	181	79,992
Quebec	513	257	7,748,521
Saskatchewan	362	208	865,049
Yukon	555	421	33,164
<i>Canada</i>	<i>401</i>	<i>223</i>	<i>32,922,137</i>

Source – Statistics Canada. Table 38-10-0271-01 Potable water use by sector and average daily use (2021)

The above table also shows that across Canada, provinces with larger populations continue to have relatively lower per capita water use than do smaller communities. This characteristic is consistent with the ABmunis observation that most larger communities with growing populations in Alberta have already taken (and continue to take) deliberate action toward achieving water conservation and efficiency targets, while smaller communities tend to comprise the next wave of implementation. This reality is often a reflection of municipal capacity and highlights the opportunity that exists in continuing to extend support for further water conservation to Alberta’s smaller municipalities.

### 3.4 Leakage and Other Water Loss

Every water system leaks. The extent of this loss can, however, vary considerably from one municipality to the next. Reporting water loss is variable on the amount of use in a community. As a population uses less water, the amount of losses report as a percentage tends to increase as some leaks are independent of water use behavioural changes. Water loss and leaks in distribution systems also tend to creep up as aging infrastructure will deteriorate

over its designed lifecycle. Communities with old water infrastructure systems tend to have large amounts of unaccounted for water loss.

As implied in Section 3.2, the process of accounting for water usage by each sector also allows for calculating leakage and otherwise unaccounted for volumes. This “non-revenue” water is an important indicator of the condition and efficiency of the overall system.

Statistics Canada estimated that, on average, 16.5% of water from municipal systems across Canada, and 14.9% of water from municipal systems across Alberta, was unaccounted for. Across Canada a total of 806 billion litres of water was lost due to leaks in distribution systems in 2021. To help visualize this loss and opportunity, consider that in 2013 the U.S., the losses are at 14-18% which translates to 22.3 billion litres of expensive, treated water lost each day - that’s enough water to meet the daily water needs of 61 million Americans (Centre for Neighborhood Technology, 2013).

Identifying and mitigating water loss represents the single greatest supply-side opportunity for water providers to conserve water, recover lost revenues, and improve overall operational efficiency.

## 4.0 New Water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity Targets

Recognizing that the sustainability of our communities is tied to the sustainability of our water supplies, and that municipalities are one of the province's largest water using sectors, ABmunis has established the following goal to guide the renewed water CEP plan:

The renewed plan proposes an outcomes-based approach in setting water conservation, efficiency, and productivity targets for the urban municipal sector. This approach allows for flexibility in how municipalities, water utilities and water users contribute to achieving the targets.

Setting clear volume-based water use and water loss targets for the urban municipal sector as a whole further allows ABmunis to showcase the collective efforts and successes of its members, rather than reporting on the status and/or actions of individual municipalities.

Proposed targets are:

- 1) **Alberta's urban municipal sector will achieve an average per capita residential water use of 170 litres/person/day (l/c/d) or a 10% reduction from current residential water usage - whichever is lower – by 2027.**
- 2) **Alberta's urban municipal sector will achieve a total per capita water use of 307 litres/person/day (l/c/d) by 2027.**

The proposed residential water use target of 170 l/c/d by 2027 is within the range of residential water use targets set by many Alberta municipalities as per their own water conservation and efficiency plans. ABmunis addresses residential water use targets for municipalities that have already achieved 170 l/c/d or that have other unique circumstances with the target of reducing residential usage by 10% by 2027. Whichever of these two targets is the lower will dictate the residential water use target for that municipality.

The total water use target of 307 l/c/d by 2027 emphasizes the opportunity that exists to improve water conservation, efficiency, and productivity amongst all municipal water users.

- 3) **Alberta's urban municipal sector will maintain the volume of "unaccounted for" water at 10% of total water use and set a target Infrastructure Leakage Index (ILI) at 3.0 – 5.0.**

"Unaccounted for" water, also referred to as "non-revenue water" refers to water that has been produced and is "lost" before it reaches the customer. Losses can be real (as a result leakage) or apparent (through theft, metering inaccuracies, or authorized unmetered consumption). As reported in Section 3.4, unaccounted for water can amount to considerable losses for a municipality.

Environment Canada suggests that in most cases a municipal leak detection and repair program is only cost-effective when the volume of unaccounted for water in a municipal system exceeds 10% to 15%. Statistics Canada's most recent reporting year in 2021 indicates that water losses in distribution systems were calculated at 15%. For this reason, the ABmunis maintains that a percent water loss target of 10% for the urban municipal sector by 2027 is reasonable.

There are, however, limits to what even the most well-run water loss management program can achieve; zero water loss is not realistic or economical. Once the marginal cost of reducing non-revenue water exceeds the marginal benefits or water savings, there is often little incentive to further reduce water loss. The percentage of "unaccounted for" water in a distribution system will increase in a municipality that maintains extensive data collection procedures and reporting processes. A similar issue exists for a community that takes action to reduce water usage – with less demand from the residential or commercial sectors the amount of reported water loss as a percentage of the total

use will increase. Because proper data collection and reductions in water consumption can therefore increase the reported metric of water loss as a percent and make reaching a target for this metric extremely difficult, ABmunis recommends that an indicator such as the Infrastructure Leakage Index (ILI) is a more appropriate method to track the efficiency of a water distribution system.

Water use reported as a percentage by each surveyed sector in all provinces and territories is presented below in Table 3 and is an insightful figure for comparative analysis of Canadian water usage.

**Table 3 - Municipal Water Loss by Province/Territory and Municipal Population**

	Responding Population	Percent Residential Water Use	Percent Industrial/Agricultural Water Use	Percent Leaks / Unaccounted For	Percent Wholesale Water Provided To Other Jurisdictions
Alberta	3,851,092	57.91%	24.53%	14.86%	2.62%
British Columbia	4,750,581	61.53%	24.36%	11.12%	2.97%
Manitoba	1,145,379	57.99%	27.13%	14.45%	0.25%
New Brunswick	449,992	55.26%	30.61%	11.91%	0.42%
Newfoundland and Labrador	447,759	56.12%	22.24%	15.23%	2.57%
Northwest Territories	39,814	56.60%	16.98%	26.42%	0.00%
Nova Scotia	620,042	58.89%	18.72%	21.45%	0.00%
Nunavut	36,380	61.29%	22.58%	16.13%	0.00%
Ontario	12,856,372	54.95%	28.21%	13.02%	3.52%
Prince Edward Island	79,992	48.18%	40.00%	11.82%	0.00%
Quebec	7,748,521	49.77%	24.22%	24.21%	1.60%
Saskatchewan	863,049	56.08%	24.14%	16.61%	2.74%
Yukon	33,164	76.12%	14.93%	8.96%	0.00%
Canada	32,922,137	55.00%	25.62%	16.56%	2.52%

Statistics Canada. Table 38-10-0271-01 Potable water use by sector and average daily use (2021)

## 5.0 Need for Water Use Information

The greatest challenge associated with the adoption of the proposed targets will be the general lack of municipal water use information, along with built capacity in communities to effectively leverage this information.

Accurate water use information is one of the foundational elements that will help improve the management of Alberta's water resources. The ability to set meaningful water conservation and efficiency targets and to measure progress toward the achievement of those targets requires that municipalities have a thorough understanding of the users and use of the water. Unfortunately, not all municipalities report their water use to the Government of Alberta, and fewer yet actually calculate water-use by the sectors (residential, ICI, municipal, non-revenue) served within the municipality. The lack of a complete data set complicates the process of calculating water use and the success of Alberta's municipal sector water conservation efforts. This data gap was acknowledged as a shortcoming in the 2014 ABmunis CEP Plan, recommending that water use reporting by municipalities be improved so that water use and water loss measurements may be used as an indicator of the success of municipal water CEP efforts.

The 2014 CEP Plan advocated for the reinstatement of federal municipal water and wastewater survey programs, similar to the previous survey by Environment Canada ended in 2009. The Biennial Drinking Water Plants Survey is an active and ongoing census created, administered and published by Statistics Canada. The survey covers drinking water plants across Canada that survey a population of 300 people or more and is intended to create a national understanding of potable water production, water treatment and the associated costs. With data currently available up to 2021, this survey is administered every two years and is used in the ongoing accounting of water stocks and environmental accounts on a regional basis. Statistics Canada also publishes the average daily use and potable water use per sector across provinces, which provides an insight into Alberta's overall water use performance and comparative analysis with neighbouring regions. As of 2024, the user responses for the Biennial Drinking Water Plants Survey were not made public nor available upon request by Statistics Canada and therefore at this time lacks the data to analyze regional and municipal specific trends and behaviours within Alberta.

Secondary to accessible and standardized data, are tools to support member municipalities to continue to build local capacity to effectively leverage and act on water usage and loss data. From administrative approaches such as policy and operational initiatives, to collaborating with other municipalities and engaging citizens in the importance of water stewardship, conservation and efficiency, providing resources for member municipalities in actioning these changes over time will support the urban municipal sector in achieving the identified targets.

## 6.0 Actions

In order to achieve the targets detailed in this renewed ABmunis Water Conservation, Efficiency, and Productivity Plan, the following actions (directed at both the ABmunis and its member municipalities) are essential:

- 1) **ABmunis member municipalities** holding a water license(s) for municipal use will report water use data through the Government of Alberta's (GoA) Water Use Reporting System.
- 2) **ABmunis member municipalities** will continue to take action to increase water conservation by users, efficiency of water distribution systems, and productivity of water and wastewater treatment systems, so as to contribute to the urban municipal sector collectively achieving its water use and water loss targets. This includes enhancing local water use and loss information and reporting, and municipal conservation and efficiency planning.
- 3) **ABmunis** will continue to advocate with the Government of Alberta and other organizations to develop tools and a standardized and accessible open data platform to assist municipalities in understanding and measuring their water use and losses, and improve conservation, efficiency and productivity in line with targets.
- 4) **ABmunis** will advocate that the Government of Canada continue the Biennial Drinking Water Plants survey program, and to refine what information is collected and made available, as it provides a valuable benchmark for assessing the efforts of municipalities across the country and the effectiveness of water and wastewater management policies from other jurisdictions.
- 5) **ABmunis** will review and update the online tools and resources that accompany the Conservation and Efficiency Plan to continue supporting member municipalities in their efforts and actions.
- 6) **ABmunis** will collaborate with the Government of Alberta to better quantify and incorporate watershed and basin return flows from member municipalities, along with policy or initiatives that promote and support water reuse of various natures. Collaboration on water licenses and exploring the incorporation of return flows will also be explored.
- 7) **ABmunis** will advocate to the Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada for the financial support to address aging water infrastructure in Alberta for the reduction of unaccounted for losses and the improvement and resilience of distribution systems.

ABmunis will renew the targets and actions of this plan in 2027.





# Alberta Municipalities Strength In Members

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