



Subject: *Funding Sources for Bottled Water Distribution During Drought Conditions*
To: Corporate and Residential Services Committee
Date Prepared: June 6th, 2026
Related Motions: C26(152)
Prepared by: Calvin Byard, Manager of Protective Services
Approved by: Adam Clarkson, Director of Corporate Services

Summary

In May 2026, the Province announced that funding for its bottled water distribution program would be discontinued. It noted that drought and water shortages continue to pose risks due to climate change. Rather than funding bottled water distribution, the province indicated that future efforts would focus on helping communities become more water resilient through initiatives such as planning, water storage, community wells, conservation measures, and improved access to water data. The Honourable Kim Masland stated that drought is not a one-time event but predictable, recurring and as such, no longer an emergency. As such people need to take personal responsibility for ensuring they have access to water.

The province also emphasized the importance of emergency preparedness, encouraging residents and communities to be prepared to manage periods without running water and to proactively plan for environmental emergencies.

Following the announcement, Council requested that staff identify potential funding sources that could support bottled water distribution should drought conditions impact residents during the summer months. This report summarizes the results of a jurisdictional scan, reviews available funding options, and provides an overview of current water conditions.

Financial Impact Statement

As part of Councils decision making, they need to consider both the short and long term impacts to the rate payers as it may compound over time. Additionally, the indirect impacts of resourcing the service needs to be a consideration.

During the 2025 drought response, the Municipality incurred approximately \$3,600 in bottled water costs. Additional costs included staff time associated with coordinating and distributing water, involving two staff members. This amount does not include what was paid to the water utility from the Aquatic Centre.

At present, no dedicated provincial or federal funding program has been identified to support bottled water distribution. Should a similar program be required in 2026, costs could be funded through municipal operating budgets, emergency management budgets, reserve funds, or any external funding opportunities that may become available.

Recommendation

This is a request that came from Council on possible funding sources should Council want to provide a service. This is more than just funding a service, it is establishing a service that will tap into municipal resources and once started will be difficult to pull back.

Staff recommend that Council place a focus on improving community resiliency, additional public education and preparedness. As part of Council's Municipal Climate Change Action Plan there will be recommendations on community resiliency for water access.

Recommended Motion

For discussion.

Background

At the May 2026 Regular meeting of Council, the following motion C26(152) was passed:

“Moved that Council direct staff to create a broad report outlining possible sources of funding should Council determine the need to assist with bottled water in drought conditions this summer”.

In 2025, the Municipality (for the 1st time) provided bottled water to residents through the provincial program. A total of 167 families were supported with 1,323 vouchers were distributed with 1,098 vouchers redeemed and 50 cases of 24 cases of Water distributed. The program was designed to support potable water for consumption for residents who's wells were running dry. The East Hants Aquatic Centre also had a fill station and shower access that supported residents in the immediate rural area of the facility.

The cost of bottled water was approximately \$3,600, in addition to staff resources required to administer the program. Distribution and coordination of the program required the involvement of two staff members with their personal vehicles, and the Aquatic Centre rotated lifeguards to the water fill station for approximately 8 hours a day.

Council has requested that staff identify potential funding sources should a similar program be required during the 2026 summer season.

Existing Drought Mitigation Measures (Well and Septic loan)

Council has demonstrated its commitment to supporting residents experiencing water supply challenges through the Municipal Well and Septic Assistance Program.

For 2026, Council approved an increase in program funding to expand support available to residents and improve access to assistance for eligible well and septic system projects. The program provides a proactive approach to addressing water supply issues and improving long-term resilience to drought conditions. A cistern is an eligible project under this program. Cistern are a lower cost high impact option for residents to consider to support their water needs.

The Well and Septic Assistance Program serves as an important tool to assist residents in addressing water supply concerns and reducing future vulnerability to drought-related impacts.

Discussion

Current water conditions within the Municipality are favorable. Water level data collected on June 3, 2026 indicates levels are approximately 0.32 feet higher than on the same date in 2025. Water levels are also estimated to be approximately two to three weeks behind where they were at this time last year, reflecting improved water availability entering the summer season.

Water level trends in 2026 are tracking similarly to those observed in 2025, with a cold winter followed by a cool, wet spring. While spring conditions have supported water levels, there has been no significant rainfall event to date.

Current water levels are considered good; however, it is difficult to predict how conditions may evolve through the remainder of the summer. August is historically the driest month of the summer season and may present an increased risk of drought-related impacts on private water supplies. Staff will continue to monitor water levels, weather forecasts, and drought indicators throughout the summer months.

Jurisdictional Scan

Staff contacted other municipalities and internal funding staff to identify potential funding sources for bottled water distribution and drought response measures.

The Halifax Regional Municipality advised that they have explored funding opportunities related to drought response but have not identified any specific funding programs for bottled water distribution.

The Municipality of Barrington provided a bottle water program for 5 years which ended in 2021 as they no longer considered it an emergency. The program which used local fire halls and volunteers became difficult to operate to meet the needs and wasn't sustainable. They subsequently introduced a well loan program.

The Municipality of the Region of Queens is pursuing longer-term drought mitigation measures, including well-related programs, rainwater collection initiatives, and the use of water totes to support residents experiencing water shortages.

There will likely be some municipalities that choose to offer a bottle water program. The province intends to set up a standing offer procurement for water that those municipalities that choose to you can to purchase and delivery the water.

An internal review by municipal staff responsible for grants and funding identified several provincial and federal funding programs. However, these programs are generally focused on larger infrastructure, climate adaptation, and water security projects and are not intended to support the purchase and distribution of bottled water.

Based on the information gathered, staff were unable to identify any dedicated provincial or federal funding programs currently available to offset bottled water distribution costs.

Municipal Funding Options

Should bottled water distribution be required, Council may consider funding the program through one or a combination of the following municipal sources:

- General Operating Surplus, if available
- Council Contingency Funds
- General Operating Reserve Funds, subject to Council approval
- Reallocation of existing operating budgets.

Based on provincial communications in spring 2026, the key message was that Nova Scotia should view drought as an ongoing climate and water-management challenge requiring preparedness and resilience, rather than relying solely on emergency response measures. In discussions with provincial staff they have indicated that residents with a well are the owners of the water system and they are ultimately responsible.

Managing expectations and educational opportunities for residents is critical. A communications plan on impacts of drought will provide awareness for residents and is a critical next step regardless of the direction Council goes.

Alternatives

1. Receive the report for information.
2. Direct staff to establish a dedicated budget allocation for bottled water distribution from the general tax rate.
3. Direct staff to investigate additional drought mitigation measures, including well assistance programs, rainwater collection initiatives, and water storage options as part of the Municipal Climate Action Plan.

Conclusion

While current water conditions remain favorable and water levels are higher than the same period in 2025, drought conditions remain difficult to predict. Staff were unable to identify any dedicated provincial or federal funding programs for bottled water distribution. Should bottled water distribution become necessary, funding would likely need to be sourced through existing municipal budgets, reserves, or community partnerships. Staff will continue to monitor conditions and advise Council of any significant changes.

A bottled water program will be challenging for the municipality to sustain.

Attachments

Provincial press release



2025 12 15
Letter_End of Water