

The Alberta Water Act: Managing One of Our Most Vital Resources

The **Alberta Water Act (1999)** is the **primary system for water governance in Alberta**, guiding how water is allocated, used, and protected across the province. It aims to balance human needs, economic activity, and environmental sustainability. The full text of the Water Act can be found [here](#).

Key Policies

- **Water Licensing:** All surface and groundwater use requires authorization to ensure fair distribution with minor exemptions for traditional agricultural use and household use.
 - **First-in-Time, First-in-Right (FITFIR):** Older water licenses have priority access during shortages.
 - **Water Conservation Objectives (WCOs):** The government can reserve water to help protect aquatic ecosystems.
 - **Water Management Planning:** Supports watershed and regional plans to guide local decision-making.
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Proposed Amendments to Alberta's Water Act

Alberta's Fall Legislature session began on October 23, and a bill proposing amendments to the Water Act is expected to be introduced during this session. Alberta Environment and Protected Areas (AEPA) has conducted two phases of public engagement on potential changes, with the second phase concluding in June. A review of feedback from the engagement process is currently underway.

 [Learn more about the engagement process](#)

The proposed amendments are intended to increase the availability of water to Alberta municipalities, businesses, and agricultural producers, while continuing to protect the environment.

The amendments fall into **four main categories**.

Comparison of Current and Proposed Policies

Category	Current Policy	Proposed Amendments
1. Water Licensing and Transfers	Amendments to water licences (e.g., changes in point of diversion or use) require full application review. Exemptions for small-scale or temporary uses are limited.	Allows minor amendments to be processed more efficiently; sets clear service standards; expands exemption limits for dugouts, stormwater, wetland replacement, and temporary uses; adds new use category exemptions (e.g., rooftop rainwater collection, dust control).
2. Water Use Information	Measurement and reporting requirements vary by licence and are not always consistent. Limited public access to licence information.	Grants AEPA authority to update measurement and reporting requirements (including older licences); defines what constitutes a licence “in good standing”; increases transparency by publishing licence transfer information on a public platform.
3. Inter-Basin Transfers	Transfers of water between basins are generally restricted and require high-level approvals regardless of risk.	Introduces risk-based criteria for inter-basin transfers; low-risk transfers could be approved by the Minister of AEPA or Lieutenant Governor in Council; proposes to merge Peace and Athabasca basins for management purposes.
4. Alternative Water Sources	Limited guidance on the use of stormwater, wastewater, or rooftop-collected rainwater; unclear definitions for non-traditional water sources.	Adds clear definitions for “return flow” and “rainwater”; clarifies and enables the use of alternative water sources such as stormwater and reclaimed water.

 [View details of the proposed amendments \(PDF\)](#)