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Item No. 15.1.3
Halifax Regional Council
September 9, 2025

TO: Mayor Fillmore and Members of Halifax Regional Council

FROM: Cathie O'Toole, Chief Administrative Officer

DATE: August 25, 2025

SUBJECT: Drought Monitoring and Water Delivery

ORIGIN

Staff initiated

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Nova Scotia and HRM have been faced with a drought this summer. According to the Canadian Drought Monitor¹, by July 31, 2025, the entire province was in a drought. With wells in rural areas of HRM running dry, the municipality began a water distribution program supported by the Province of Nova Scotia.

The Canadian Red Cross² recommends providing 4 litres of water per person per day. Currently, the Province reimburses municipalities for up to 4 litres per person daily, to a maximum of 16 litres per household. The municipality is following the Red Cross guidelines by supplying 4 litres per person per day, without imposing a household limit. Additional water is also being provided for pets; however, these provisions are not eligible for provincial reimbursement.

Water is distributed on Wednesdays and Sundays through a network of volunteer fire stations, supported by volunteer firefighters, Joint Emergency Management Team (JEM) volunteers, and HRM staff.

To date, HRM has purchased and delivered \$59,007.12 in water to 6 distribution locations throughout HRM. At this time water supplied to larger families and pets that will not be reimbursed by the Province, is costing approximately \$2,000/per distribution day. This cost per distribution day could increase if drought conditions persist and more people need and seek water support.

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that Halifax Regional Council:

1. Direct the CAO to distribute drinking water to HRM residents who do not have well water available at a volume of 4L per day per person.
2. Approve an unbudgeted reserve withdrawal be funded from the Risk Resilience Reserve (Q416) to

¹ [Canadian Drought Monitor - agriculture.canada.ca](https://agriculture.canada.ca)

² [First Aid Kit Contents Information from the Canadian Red Cross - Canadian Red Cross](#)

a maximum of \$200,000.

3. Direct that any funding that is received from external resources, such as the provincial or federal government, be reallocated to the Risk Resilience Reserve (Q416).

BACKGROUND

Nova Scotia is in the middle of a drought. As of July 2025, large portions of the province had received less than 40% of their usual monthly rainfall. This, on top of a very dry Spring. Drought is measured on a 5-point scale, ranging from abnormally dry to moderate drought, severe drought, extreme drought, and exceptional drought. Currently, parts of Nova Scotia are in a severe drought stage.

The drought conditions have led to dry wells and reservoirs. Many rural residents of the municipality do not have access to potable water. This has happened in the Province and HRM before and during periods of drought; HRM facilitates the provision of water to those who do not have access to it through their well system. This is done by setting up water distribution centres in various areas of HRM affected by the drought.

Water is then distributed to residents, two days per week, providing people with sufficient water at one distribution to last until the next one, unless the citizen knows hardship to attend, they can access a week's supply. Currently, these are done at local volunteer fire halls, facilitated by the fire department volunteers, the Joint Emergency Management (JEM) teams, and ECC staff from Community Safety. Water is purchased in bulk by the municipality, stored in a central depot, and distributed twice per week to each fire hall based on actual distribution statistics from the previous distributions.

Currently, the Canadian Red Cross recommends as part of their emergency management kits that families have 4L of water/person/day. When providing water to families in need, HRM provides sufficient water to meet that standard and provides a water allotment for pets.

DISCUSSION

Provincial support for water distribution

The Government of Nova Scotia, Department of Emergency Management, provides assistance to municipalities requesting support to purchase and distribute bottled water during a declared water shortage. HRM is currently facing that situation and has requested assistance in this manner.

The municipality can access funding from the Province to provide 4L of bottled water per family member per day, up to a maximum of 16L per household per day (regardless of household size above four members). For example, a household of two people would receive 8L per day, while a household of four would receive 16L per day. A family of seven would still receive 16L per day, leaving each person short by approximately 1.7L daily based on Red Cross recommendations. HRM has spent approximately \$8,000 beyond the provincial water reimbursement allotment per household to date.

HRM is ensuring that all families receive the Red Cross–recommended amount of water for each household member, regardless of family size or the presence of pets.

As of August 29, the program has incurred costs of \$59,007 for water, \$18,799 for delivery fees, and \$3,135 in overtime, totaling \$80,941 over five delivery days. The delivery fees and overtime costs are not eligible for reimbursement.

Transportation to reach a water distribution centre

One of the common challenges in any service delivery in rural HRM is transportation. The municipality selects water distribution centres based on location, storage, and volunteer capacity. The goal is to have a water distribution centre within a 25-minute drive of the residents impacted by the water shortage. There is a balance in determining locations, as the more locations HRM creates, the higher the costs for both resources, delivery, and staff. There are requests for community members wanting distribution centres closer to them.

There are also requests for home delivery for people who are unable to leave their homes or drive that far. In these situations, people have already established ways to get their supplies to their homes; home delivery is possible but would require significant resources for additional delivery and management of the program.

Alternative delivery models

Other municipalities in Nova Scotia have chosen to use a voucher program to supply water to those impacted by drought. In this model, residents with dry wells can pick up coupons at the municipal office or request coupons by email and exchange them at local retailers for 4L bottles of water. With this program, residents are able to pick up water at any time the participating retailers are open. There are potential logistical challenges in HRM to manage a program like this successfully.

HRM staff recommend continuing with the existing practices for water distribution and review other similar programs, such as the voucher system used by other municipalities in Nova Scotia, to determine the most effective and efficient manner to address drinking water shortages in the future.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The costs of delivering enough water per day per person are currently \$16,000/per delivery day. Assuming that the drought continues past the advertised September 10th date to the end of September, and the need for water distribution remains steady, this cost increases to over \$190,000. Based on the current program offered by the province, \$160,000 of these costs will be charged back. Approximately \$30,000 of the costs for water supplied are above the Provincial limit and are not eligible for reimbursement. In addition, the costs for water delivery and additional staff support for the program are not eligible for reimbursement. Should the demand for water increase, these costs also increase. The existing Community Safety budget does not have sufficient funds for this service, but it is recommended that funds could be withdrawn from Risk Resilience Reserve (Q416) to a maximum of \$200,000 to cover the overall program costs. Any funds received from reimbursement from the Province for this program will be deposited back into this Reserve.

Adding additional water distribution centres would increase the need for more water on hand, distribution, and other operational costs. The additional cost would depend on how many additional water distribution centres were added.

Similarly, water distribution to people's homes could be extremely expensive and would depend on the availability of volunteers, if paid couriers were required, and the number of homes and their locations needing this service.

RISK CONSIDERATION

There are reputational risks to HRM if, during an emergency water distribution plan, the municipality does not supply the recommended amount of water per person to each person potentially require people to ration water between children, adults, or seniors.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

No community engagement was required.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

The use of bottled water has a significant environmental impact. Fossil fuels are required to produce plastics, and many plastic water bottles end up in landfills or other areas, where their breakdown threatens wildlife and ecosystems. In addition, production and transportation methods have negative impacts. While HRM recognizes these impacts, there are few other options available to provide water to people whose wells have run dry. The municipality does try to reduce the amount of plastic used by providing 4L jugs of water instead of individual 500ml bottles.

ALTERNATIVES

Regional Council could choose to:

1. Direct the CAO to restrict the amount of water distributed per family up to the maximum amount reimbursable from the Province.
2. Direct the CAO to establish more water distribution centres so that the maximum driving time for a resident from their home to the distribution centre is reduced.
3. Direct staff to develop a home delivery service for water for those people who are unable to leave their home on their own or drive to a water distribution centre.

LEGISLATIVE AUTHORITY

Halifax Regional Municipality Charter:

Section 7A The purposes of the Municipality are to

- (a) provide good government;
- (b) provide services, facilities and other things that, in the opinion of the Council, are necessary or desirable for all or part of the Municipality; and
- (c) develop and maintain safe and viable communities.

Administrative Order Number 2014-015-ADM Respecting Reserve Funding Strategies

12B. (1) The Chief Administrative Officer may submit a report directly to Council without a recommendation from Audit and Finance Standing Committee where:

(a) the Chief Administrative Officer is satisfied that there is a matter that cannot be delayed for the next regularly scheduled meeting of the Audit and Finance Standing Committee; and

(b) the matter will have an impact on a reserve or would require a withdrawal from a reserve not previously approved in the budget.

(2) Nothing in this section prevents Council from referring any matter in subsection (1) to the Audit and Finance Standing Committee

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