

WEBINAR SUMMARY

Municipal Water Consortium

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Calgary's 2024 water shortage response: Lessons in resilience

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Overview

In the summer of 2024, Calgary's Bearspaw feeder main failure tested the city's ability to rapidly reduce water demand across a service population of 1.8 million people. Responding to the crisis required far more than infrastructure repairs. It demanded a coordinated effort encompassing emergency communications, customer engagement, demand management, regional collaboration, and organizational resilience. The experience generated valuable lessons that can help municipalities prepare for and respond to both drought-related and infrastructure-driven water shortages.

On July 8, 2026, Canadian Water Network hosted a webinar featuring insights from Nicole Newton, director of environmental risk and resilience at the City of Calgary. Nicole shared Calgary's experience managing the feeder main failure, the strategies used to achieve significant water savings, and the lessons learned that can help other municipalities strengthen their preparedness, response, and recovery capabilities.

As municipalities contend with aging infrastructure, climate change, population growth, and increasing pressures on water supplies, Calgary's experience offers valuable insights into how Canadian municipalities can build a demand management program that can perform under pressure.

Key lessons for municipal utilities

Demand management is no longer optional

Calgary's experience demonstrated that demand management is not just a conservation initiative. It is a core water security and resilience function that can help utilities maintain service during infrastructure failures, droughts, and other supply disruptions. Investments in customer engagement, communications, water efficiency, and conservation programs strengthen a municipality's ability to respond when emergencies occur.



Translate conservation targets into specific actions

Residents do not necessarily understand what a 25 percent reduction target means. Calgary found greater success when communications focused on a small number of simple, high-impact actions such as 3-minute showers, scraping plates instead of rinsing, and flushing only when necessary.

Prepare tools and messaging before an emergency occurs

Many of Calgary's most effective communication materials, toolkits, and outreach approaches were developed during the crisis. Municipalities can strengthen preparedness by developing demand-management playbooks, customer contact lists, and communications templates in advance.

Work directly with large water users

Direct engagement with major industrial, commercial, and institutional customers helped Calgary achieve meaningful water-use reductions. Existing relationships, clear communication channels, and sector-specific guidance enabled businesses and institutions to respond quickly and effectively. This demonstrates the value of proactive engagement beyond broad public outreach.

Use multiple communications channels and trusted messengers

Community organizations, business associations, faith groups, schools, traditional media, social media, and in-person outreach helped Calgary reach audiences who may not engage with municipal communications.

Treat demand management as a long-term capability, not an emergency measure

Many of Calgary's response tools are being retained and expanded to address future droughts, infrastructure disruptions, and long-term water security challenges.