

Canadian Water Network's 
Canadian Municipal Water Consortium

COVID-19 Strategic Sharing Group: Water Utility Management Response

Meeting Date: March 27, 2020 from 1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m. EDT
Facilitator: Kim Jusek, Canadian Water Network

There were 21 municipalities participating from coast to coast (see the [attendee list](#)).

This meeting serves as an update to the March 20th meeting on approaches and responses taken by municipalities/utilities across Canada for maintaining or scaling back municipal water services during the uncertain and rapidly evolving circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic (see the [meeting agenda](#)).

Summary

The following themes were discussed:

- Business continuity planning
 - Staffing structures, challenges, compensation, contingency planning
 - Prioritization and continuance of capital program and O&M work
 - Safe working protocols and practices
- Increasing provincial regulatory guidance and dialogue
- Effective and timely internal and public messaging
- Revenue impact projections: changing water trends, relief or deferral on payments

Update on Municipal Actions:

As this is a quickly evolving situation, there were several provincial regulatory updates in the past week:

- Greater guidance on operator qualifications in some provinces
- Discussions on relief for water quality sampling
- More clarity in some provinces around the operation of critical infrastructure designated as 'essential services'
- Guidance, or lack thereof, on continuation of construction projects
- Continued guidance on safe working practices
- Generally, utilities are starting to see more communication and collaboration between provincial regulators and cities

While there are varied regional approaches across Canada, overall, business continuity planning and implementation is underway to account for maintaining acceptable levels of service, protecting staff and the public, and contingency planning for a range of scenarios. A few of the key topics of discussion and decision-points this week have been around continuance of capital

programs and operations-related work in the community, handling of worker safety, and more detailed contingency planning for skilled workers.

Regarding the **continuance of capital** programs, there is a range of approaches across Canadian utilities and municipalities.

- Particularly in western provinces, business-as-usual approaches to construction projects and preventative maintenance programs are more common, with increased safety precautions and prioritization planning exercises underway or in place should projects need to be scaled back. In the central and eastern provinces, while there are exceptions there is a greater tendency to scale back non-essential projects and cease construction work altogether.
- Consistent across most communities is cessation of work which would interrupt water supply or necessitate any plant shut-downs.
- The ***decision on whether to continue or scale back capital projects*** is one that many municipalities are currently grappling with. This decision can be motivated by provincial guidance or requirements, health authority direction, and senior management decisions considering the ability to comply with safety requirements, third-party contractor or supplier withdrawal or inability to sustain projects, and/or feedback from staff and the public regarding perception of responsible actions. *Contractor, staff, and public relations and perceptions are becoming growing concerns.*

Overall approaches to **protect worker safety** are solidifying and evolving.

- Outside of BC, most utilities have non-essential or office staff working from home. Procedures around social distancing and disinfecting shared work spaces are being followed where staff are still performing their work in shared or communal spaces. Staff self-isolation protocols are also being implemented.
- Protocols for scaling back the field workforce, restricting facility access, and limiting interaction between shifts and different crews are being implemented to minimize exposure. PPE is in use for necessary home visits and circumstances where staff have to work within 2m of each other.
- Availability and type of PPE being used varies across the country, but this is less of a concern overall compared to last week, with municipalities prioritizing pooled resources for water/wastewater operators and a number of utilities have begun to ***make disinfectant in-house***, using diluted sodium hypochlorite which is readily available.
- A current decision some municipalities are ***seeking clarity on is return to work protocols*** if an employee or family member has been sick or self-isolating. Most utilities are taking guidance on this decision from their provincial health authority.
- Some advancements in terms of worker protection include:

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- Temperature-taking and health self-assessments are being tested for workers entering job sites and facilities;
- Discussion with the provinces about prioritized COVID-19 testing for critical operations staff to reduce the turnaround time on results.
- Measures to provide access to washroom facilities for essential field staff (identifying city-facilities, implementing portable toilets, etc.).

More detailed **skilled worker contingency planning** is underway, connected to prioritization efforts around maintaining levels of service over a longer time horizon.

- Municipalities/utilities are continuing to identify through **staff skills assessments and operations prioritization exercises** which staff roles are essential, and contingency planning for scenarios where those staff may be in self-isolation or quarantine.
- Longer-time horizons, such as 12-18 months, are beginning to be explored to support workforce and operations with more permanent solutions.
- Recent regulatory guidance has been provided in Alberta and Ontario regarding greater flexibility on who is considered qualified to operate critical facilities.
- A greater number of utilities have begun to plan for **shelter-in-place scenarios** and identified trigger points for enacting such measures. This past week, [City of Brandon](#) in Manitoba implemented shelter-in-place for their water treatment plant.
- There has been limited discussion on coordinating with neighboring communities.

Key Emerging Challenges:

- **Staff compensation** remains an ongoing conversation at some municipalities/utilities considering reduced workload.
 - A number of utilities are currently undergoing decision-making regarding employee compensation considering reduced work output, reduced revenues, uncertain political and regulatory landscape, and uncertain time horizons, etc.
 - For the near-term, the majority have decided to continue to pay staff and have negotiated with their respective unions plans for pay continuity, and consider field or operations staff who can't do work from home 'on call' while reduced workforce practices are in place.
- **Staff mental health** regarding working arrangements continues to be a challenge.
 - Creating effective and timely internal communications has generally been a challenge despite strong communication channels, as the situation is evolving so rapidly.
 - Staff and increasingly their families are continuing to express anxiety over their health and safety in the work place.

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- Overall there has been a reported decrease in staff morale, and ensuring staff stay informed, connected and feel appreciated has been a growing priority for utility leaders. Some utilities are launching internal communication campaigns and a growing number are exploring other mental health support tools.
- There is a growing need for improved **public communications**, on two key topics: **1) essential construction or operations work**, and **2) flushable wipes**.
 - There is a strong trend of growing public concern being expressed around the continuation of construction and operations work in the community. Considering this, it may necessitate the utility to re-evaluate the appropriateness of continuing with certain projects, and/or seek to improve public messaging around the importance of this work to maintain essential water services.
 - Several utilities have reported the increase in non-flushable wipes and the negative impact this is having on sanitary collection systems and WWTPs. Some utilities which have not experienced this, credit early and strong public communication efforts.

Upcoming considerations and opportunities:

Looking ahead, some utilities are starting to consider longer-term strategies, both for managing a longer time horizon of adjusted utility management and to better prepare for coming out the other side of this challenging time.

- **Increased need for cross-sectoral and cross-departmental collaboration and cooperation.**
 - It has become clear that those experiencing less friction in making adjustments have embraced strong cooperation efforts with various stakeholders, including provincial regulators, local and provincial public health departments, municipal governments, local unions, local businesses including suppliers and contractors, neighbouring municipalities, and the public.
- **Financial impact assessments, in part due to changing water use trends**
 - While overall water use may be stable, utilities are anticipating a decrease in ICI water use and an increase in domestic demand. Some municipalities are starting to monitor water use to help with revenue projections.
 - Revenue projections underway are also considering impacts of delayed capital projects, reduced work output, and reduced revenue from tax and bill deferrals.
- **Testing wastewater for coronavirus to detect future resurgences**
 - There is an opportunity to implement a monitoring program to collect influent wastewater samples to study the concentration of the coronavirus before, during, and after the pandemic crisis, in order to better be prepared for the next wave of COVID-19; similar to what the [Dutch](#) are undertaking.

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Attendees

Municipality/Utility	Participant
Alberta Capital Region Wastewater Commission	Wade Teveniuk
City of Abbotsford	Jamie Austin
City of Abbotsford	Ron Bernier
City of Calgary	Carolyn Bowen
City of Calgary	Nancy Stalker
City of Guelph	Arun Hindupur
City of Guelph	Tim Robertson
City of Hamilton	Andrew Grice
City of Hamilton	Cari Vanderperk
City of Hamilton	Nick Winters
City of Hamilton	Terry Josephson
City of Montreal	Carole Fleury
City of Ottawa	Tammy Rose
City of Regina	Kurtis Doney
City of Regina	Pat Wilson
City of Saskatoon	Russ Munro
City of St. John's	Lynnnann Winsor
City of Surrey	Adam Quan
City of Surrey	Ravi Boyal
City of Surrey	Tara Macrae
City of Thunder Bay	Kerri Marshall
City of Thunder Bay	Michelle Warywoda
City of Vancouver	Andrea Becker
City of Vancouver	Michael Irvine
City of Vancouver	Samuel Li
City of Winnipeg	Tim Shanks
EPCOR	Christopher Ward
EPCOR	Cindy Shepel
Halifax Water	Cathie O'Toole
Halifax Water	Wendy Krkosek
Peel Region	Jeff Hennings
Region of Durham	Ian Mcilwham
Township of Langley	Jennifer Elderkin
Township of Langley	Rick Campagna
Union Water	Rodney Bouchard
Utilities Kingston	Allen Lucas

Agenda

Agenda: COVID-19 Peer-sharing – Water Utility Management Response	
Friday March 27, 2020 1:00 – 2:30 pm EST	
1:00 – 1:10 pm	Welcome and Introductions
1:10 – 2:20 pm	<p>Discussion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Each municipality/utility has approximately 3 minutes to share with the group, with some time for Q&A. • <u>Please consider the list of discussion points below.</u> Prioritize and share your municipality/utility's most relevant updates and your top challenges with the group, in order to flag common needs and/or offer insights and guidance to your colleagues. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Updates to emergency response and operations protocols to maintain business continuity, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritization of operations/capital projects. • Plan development for worsening conditions. • Worker health and safety precautions, including physical distancing measures. 2. Updates on key challenges, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce management (internal communications, mental health, IT challenges, field staff working arrangements, etc.) • Regulatory guidance. • Acquisition of protective equipment/disinfectant. • New or emerging challenges. 3. Updates on more forward looking opportunities, particularly as it relates to staffing challenges, including details on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenario planning to prepare contingencies and identify trigger or decision points. • Details on staffing skills assessments; what is being considered, coordination among neighbouring communities, challenges with implementation, etc. 4. Other considerations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revenue impacts and projections; • Compounding factors, such as spring floods, demand/flow changes, etc.
2:20 – 2:30 pm	Wrap-up