

# Licensing Groundwater in B.C.

## Questions and Answers

On February 29, 2016 the [Water Sustainability Act](#) (WSA) modernized B.C.'s water legislation for the benefit all British Columbians – our communities and families, our environment and our economy. The WSA brought in important changes to manage groundwater and better protect water security and safety.

If you use water from a well for non-domestic use, you are now **legally required** to obtain a water licence. These *Questions and Answers* will clarify the new requirements and help you to determine if your water use requires a water licence and if so, what is needed to submit your application.

If you still have questions after reading these Q&As or need help with your water licence application, please contact FrontCounter BC (1-877-855-3222). More information is available at [groundwater.gov.bc.ca](http://groundwater.gov.bc.ca) and in the online [brochure](#).



## Questions and Answers

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## General

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### 1. Am I Using Groundwater?

Under the WSA, groundwater is water naturally occurring below the surface of the ground. If you use water from a well, then you are a groundwater user. This includes all businesses, irrigators, industries, waterworks and others who divert, use or store water from a well.

Water from dugouts may be considered groundwater depending on circumstances. Please visit the [Authorization Requirements for Storage and Use of Water in Dugouts](#) policy bulletin for more information on dugouts.

### 2. Why is the Government Licensing Groundwater?

Water is a precious and limited resource. As B.C.'s population continues to grow and the climate changes, we are experiencing higher water use demands on rivers, lakes and aquifers, more frequent drought events and a greater need to manage water carefully to the benefit of people, the environment and the economy.

Groundwater licensing ensures there is a fair and transparent process in place for determining who uses the water, including during water shortages. Licensing groundwater helps protect aquifers and streams as well as the businesses and livelihoods that depend on reliable access to groundwater.

### 3. Do I Need a Water Licence?

A water licence issued by the B.C. government allows non-domestic groundwater users to lawfully divert, use, or store groundwater and construct works, unless you are exempted. A water licence specifies the:

- Water source
- Location of the water use
- Maximum quantity of water that may be used
- Water use purpose
- Works associated with the water use
- Date of precedence of the water right

	<b>Licence Required</b> <i>Non-Domestic Use</i>
<p><b>You need a water licence</b> if you use groundwater for <i>uses other than domestic purposes</i>.</p> <p>This includes businesses, irrigators, industries, waterworks, and others who divert or use groundwater from a well or a dugout for non-domestic purposes.</p> <p>Home businesses must also apply for a water licence.</p>	

	<b>Licence Not Required</b> <i>Domestic Use</i>
<p><b>You do not need a licence</b> if you use groundwater for <i>domestic purposes</i> including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• using water for a private dwelling household;</li> <li>• fire prevention;</li> <li>• private lawn and garden watering (up to 1,000m<sup>2</sup> or ¼ acre); and</li> <li>• providing water to domestic animals or poultry kept as pets or for household use.</li> </ul> <p>Even if you do not need a licence, you are encouraged to <a href="#">register your well</a> to protect your domestic water use rights.</p>	



#### 4. Do I Need a Licence for my Household Well?

No, a water licence is not required for a household well or groundwater used for domestic purposes, but you are encouraged to [register your well](#). Please note there is **no cost** to registering your domestic use well.

Well registration is just for **domestic groundwater use** – at no cost to you.

By registering your well, your right to use groundwater for domestic purposes can be protected in times of water scarcity and considered by decision makers in their review of applications for non-domestic water rights from the same or connected water sources.

##### To register your well:

- Contact FrontCounter BC or search the [provincial wells database](#) to determine if a record for your well already exists.
- If no record exists, complete a [Well Registration Form](#) and email it to [Groundwater@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Groundwater@gov.bc.ca) or mail it to your [Regional Groundwater Contact](#).

Before submitting your well registration form:

- Ensure your well is used for domestic purposes only.
- Complete all required information.
- Attach a sketch or map depicting where the well is located on the property.
- Provide any supporting documentation (e.g., well construction report) if available.
- Sign the well registration form.




#### 5. Why Should I Apply?

You are **legally required** to obtain a water licence for your non-domestic groundwater use. Your application options depend on when you first started using your groundwater:

New User	Existing User
Your groundwater use began <b>after February 29, 2016</b> . Apply online at <a href="http://groundwater.gov.bc.ca">groundwater.gov.bc.ca</a> under:	Your groundwater use began <b>before March 1, 2016</b> . Apply online at <a href="http://groundwater.gov.bc.ca">groundwater.gov.bc.ca</a> under:
<b>“Groundwater New Use”</b>	<b>“Groundwater Existing Use”</b>
<i>You must apply for and obtain a licence before any groundwater can be lawfully diverted, used or stored.</i>	<i>You must apply for a licence by March 1, 2022.</i> <i>Existing users who have applied can continue using groundwater for non-domestic uses until a decision is made on their application.</i>

## 6. What Are the Benefits of Having a Water Licence?

A water licence is tied to your land and has many benefits:

Benefits of Applying for a Water Licence Now		New Users	Existing Users
<b>Rights and Law</b> 	Secures your water rights: grants you rights and the legal authority to use water	✓	✓
	Your water right will be given priority over newer users during times of scarcity	✓	✓
	You will be complying with the <i>Water Sustainability Act</i>	✓	✓
	Establishes your <i>first-in-time, first-in-right (FITFIR)</i> priority date	✓	✓
	Recognizes your historic groundwater use if you are an existing user ( <i>see Q.5 for "Existing User"</i> ) and provided you apply by March 1, 2022		✓
<b>Business Benefits</b> 	Can enhance the value of your property	✓	✓
	Grants you a right to a specific water volume to support your business	✓	✓
	Protects your right to water from newer users and future development	✓	✓
	Provides a fair and transparent system for managing water during shortages	✓	✓
	You are part of a streamlined application process if you are an existing user and you apply by March 1, 2022 ( <i>see Q.5 for "Existing User"</i> )		✓
	You are exempt from paying application fees if you are an existing user and you apply by March 1, 2022		✓
<b>Water Protection</b> 	Helps protect water resources for the benefit of all British Columbians	✓	✓
	Helps ensure sustainable management of your water supply	✓	✓

## 7. What Happens if I Don't Apply?

**New Users** (also see Q.5):

- You must submit a water application before you can lawfully use, divert, or store any groundwater.
- New Users who have not applied for a licence before using groundwater will be committing an offence under the WSA.
- Your water rights will not be secured, you may be subject to fines and penalties, and you may be ordered to cease using water.

**Existing Users** (also see Q.5):

After **March 1, 2022**, users who have not applied but continue diverting, using or storing groundwater will be committing an offence under the WSA. You may be subject to fines and penalties and may be ordered to cease using water. After **March 1, 2022**, you will need to apply as a **New User** which means:

- Your application could be refused if there is not enough water.
- Your priority date will not be your date of first use; it will likely be the date of application.
- You will no longer be exempted from paying the application fee.
- Your water rights may not be secured.
- You will be subject to all the requirements of a new application and may be required to submit a report on water availability.

## Applying for a Licence

### 8. How do I Apply?

Applications can be submitted online at [groundwater.gov.bc.ca](http://groundwater.gov.bc.ca) under the option that best suits you: **Groundwater New Use**, **Groundwater Existing Use**, or register your well for free under **Domestic Use of Groundwater**.

**Register for a Basic BCeID** (online account) so you can save your application and return to it later. Register quickly in one step by visiting [www.bceid.ca](http://www.bceid.ca) and selecting “basic BCeID”.

### Secure Your Water Rights Today

The *Water Sustainability Act* now requires that non-domestic users of groundwater obtain an authorization.

#### Groundwater New Use After February 29, 2016

Commercial, industrial, or agricultural use of groundwater that began after February 29, 2016.



Apply Now

#### Groundwater Existing Use Before March 1, 2016

Commercial, industrial, or agricultural use of groundwater that began before March 1, 2016.



Apply Now

#### Domestic Use of Groundwater

Using groundwater for domestic use in a private home. Does not require a licence, but you are encouraged to register your well.



Register Now

### 9. What Do I Need Before I Apply?

You will need information and evidence about your well and water usage to complete a water licence application. A **complete list of information** that most applicants will need is available online:

[www.frontcounterbc.gov.bc.ca/pdf/EUGW-Checklist.docx](http://www.frontcounterbc.gov.bc.ca/pdf/EUGW-Checklist.docx)

Save time by collecting this commonly requested information before you apply:

- Well location and water source information
- Well construction reports
- Pumping Records
- Pump test reports and water quality test results

Search [apps.nrs.gov.bc.ca/gwells](http://apps.nrs.gov.bc.ca/gwells) to see if a **record for your well** already exists.



- Property and water use information
- Map of your property and where your water is used
- If an existing user, evidence of when you began your water usage
- Information on any permits or authorizations you may have

## 10. How Much Does a Licence Cost?

There is a one-time application fee (minimum \$250) that is processed at the end of your online application. **This fee is waived for Existing Users who apply before the March 1, 2022 deadline.**

**Existing Users** are required to pay annual rentals retroactive to February 29, 2016, the date the WSA came into force. Annual rentals depend on your water use purpose and the quantity of water used. Use this [online rental estimator](#) to determine how much water rental may be payable.

### Other Exemptions from Fees and Rentals

Application fees and annual rentals are not required from:

- First Nations using water on reserve land;
- an exempt person or entity under a First Nations treaty final agreement;
- a person or entity that is exempt under the Nisga'a Final Agreement;
- Provincial or Federal Ministries; or
- for approvals, change approvals and permits that are processed by the B.C. Oil and Gas Commission.

## 11. What Happens After I Apply?

Your application will go through several steps before a decision is made about whether to grant the water licence.

### Step 1) FrontCounter BC Receives your Application

- Your payment (if applicable) will be processed.
- Your application will be reviewed along with any supporting documentation you provided.
- If more information is required, FrontCounter BC will contact you.
- Your application will proceed once all required information and the payment (if applicable) are received.

### Step 2) Consultations and Referrals

- Applications may be referred to other Provincial and Federal regulatory agencies for comment.
- Consultation with First Nations, other water users, community groups or other parties may be required if they could be affected by your application.

### Step 3) Technical Review

- Water Stewardship staff will conduct a more thorough application review, including assessing the connectivity to surface water sources, the available water supply, and impacts to the aquatic environment and other rights holders.
- You may be asked to provide additional information.
- A recommendation will be made for the consideration of a Statutory Decision Maker who is authorized under the WSA to grant a water licence.



#### Step 4) Decision

- A Statutory Decision Maker will decide whether to approve your application.
- You will be informed of the decision and provided with your licence documents, if approved.

## 12. How Can I Get Help with my Application?

Contact FrontCounter BC to learn about your options or get help. Please call before going to an office to get help with your application. FrontCounter BC staff can assist you in identifying necessary information to make the application process as easy as possible.

#### FrontCounter BC Contact Information

- **Toll Free:** 1-877-855-3222
- **E-mail:** [FrontCounterBC@gov.bc.ca](mailto:FrontCounterBC@gov.bc.ca)

## Useful Links

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#### Applying Online (Non-Domestic Users)

- Online application: [groundwater.gov.bc.ca](http://groundwater.gov.bc.ca)
- Register for a basic BCeID (online account) to save and continue your application later, and edit your application after it is submitted: <http://www.bceid.ca/>

#### Water Fees and Rentals

- [Annual Water Rental Rates Estimator](#)
- [Application Fees and Costs](#)

#### More Information on Groundwater Licensing

- [Groundwater Licensing in B.C. Brochure](#)
- [New Requirements for Groundwater Users](#)
- [Groundwater Licensing Process](#)
- [Authorization Requirements for Storage and Use of Water in Dugouts](#)

#### Registering a Domestic-Use Well

- [Domestic well registration process](#)
- [Domestic Well Registration Form](#)

#### Collecting Information

- Well Data Search ("GWells"): <https://apps.nrs.gov.bc.ca/gwells/>
- [Complete list of information](#) that most applicants will require
- [Joint Works Agreement](#), if you share or are connected to another person's works
- [Descriptions of water use purposes](#)
- [B.C. Agriculture Water Calculator](#) to estimate your crop irrigation or livestock water needs

#### Help Drawing or Making Maps

- [Application Drawing Standards](#)
- [B.C. Agriculture Water Calculator](#) (recommended for its easy to use format)
- [FrontCounter BC Mapping Tool](#)

#### Legislation

- [Water Sustainability Act](#)
- [Water Sustainability Regulation](#)