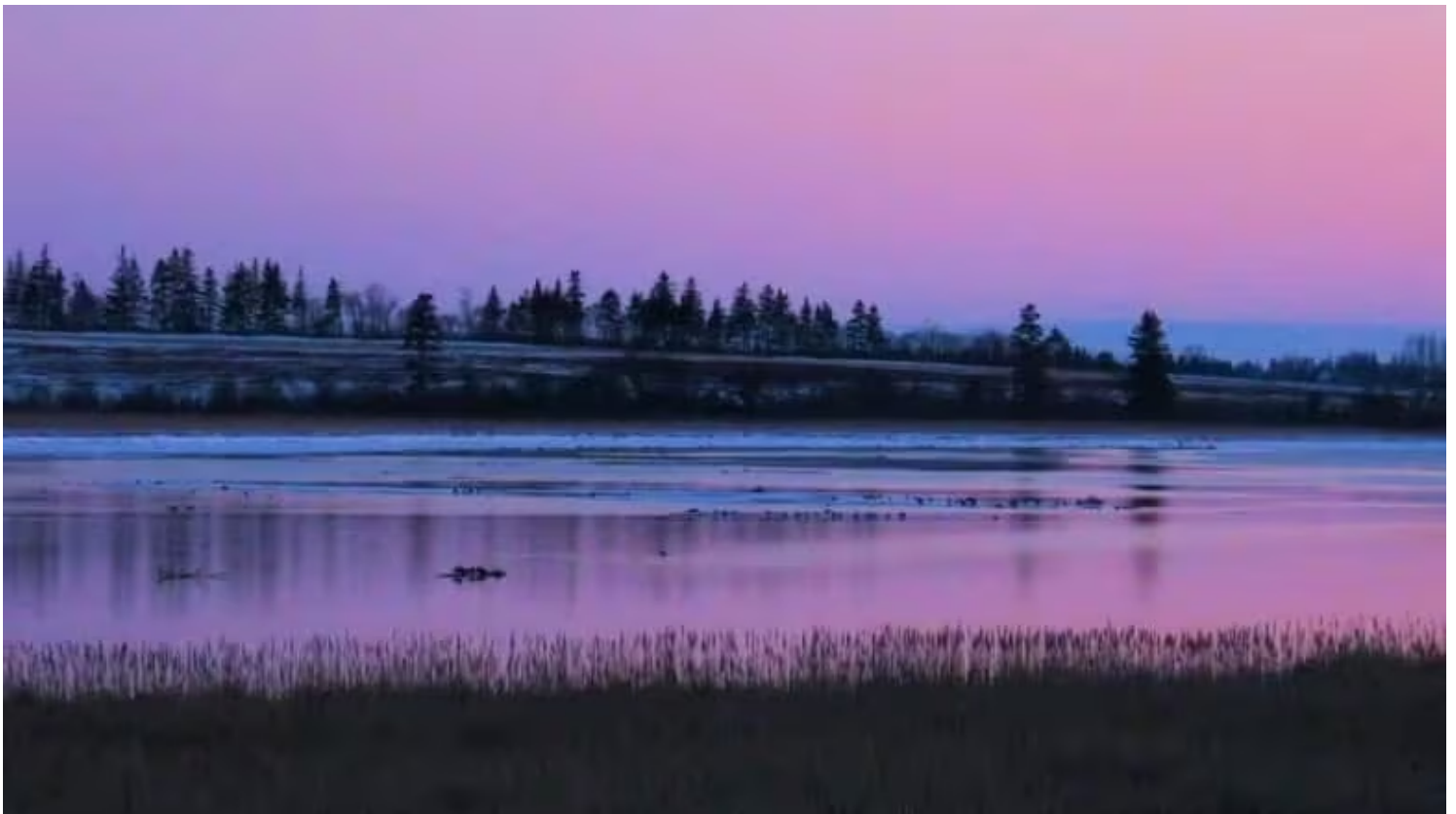


PEI

P.E.I. environment officials consider creating water-use buffer

Looking at permitting only 90% of allowed use of a waterway in irrigation strategy

Laura Chapin · Posted: Aug 09, 2021 1:26 PM ADT | Last Updated: August 9, 2021



The Dunk River watershed is one of the areas being looked at. (Sandy Arsenault)

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P.E.I. environment officials are mulling whether to create a water-use buffer given that farmers will be able to apply to construct more high-capacity wells under the province's impending irrigation strategy.

Currently, regulations allow groundwater wells to draw down a waterway by 35 per cent of a stream's base flow in August and September. But Bruce Raymond, manager of water and air monitoring at the Department of Environment, Energy and Climate Action, says officials are weighing whether to only permit 90 per cent of that draw down.

"In the act, there is the ability for the minister to reserve water for particular reasons — good planning reasons," said Raymond. "If we were to adopt that 90 per cent, then, yes, we would be more conservative."

Raymond cautions this is being discussed as a possibility under the new provincial irrigation strategy, but he said it hasn't been formally proposed yet. The first draft of the strategy is expected to be released this fall, with public consultation to follow.

More conservative approach to water use

During a standing committee presentation in late July, Raymond presented numbers outlining the difference the 90 per cent rule could make in the Dunk River watershed, a waterway in the heart of a potato-growing area of the province.

Under current rules, if the Dunk were fully permitted, and all those water-users were using the maximum amount of water allowed, they'd be using 55,639 cubic metres of water a day. Raymond reported that would drop to 45,579 cubic metres a day if the 90 per cent rule were in play — an 18 per cent drop.

Raymond told CBC News actual water use is far lower than this, but these numbers illustrate the highest potential impact on a waterway if all allowed users were pumping at their maximum capacity at one time.

Groundwater users currently never asked to stop

Unlike surface water extraction permits, which can be suspended when a waterway drops below 30 per cent of its mean base flow, under the current rules Raymond said groundwater well owners are never told to stop pumping, even in extreme drought conditions.

"Currently groundwater doesn't have a cut-off. We don't know whether or not the development of an irrigation strategy might change that."

Raymond said when they developed the current rules for groundwater wells, officials were trying to be conservative enough that a cut-off wasn't needed.

"Remember these rules not only apply to agricultural irrigation, they apply to all high-capacity wells," including municipal drinking water systems.

Why drought contingency plans key

Raymond said it's not realistic to tell the city of Charlottetown you need to shut down your water supply.

"The last thing that we would want to do is say, 'oh, we're in a drought, turn 'em off.'"

That's why officials are asking high-capacity well owners to submit a drought contingency plan when they request a permit for a high-capacity well, outlining what they will do to protect the environment when conditions are dry.

Raymond said this is something the city of Charlottetown is already doing with the water restrictions it has in play from the beginning of June to the end of September. The rules include not hosing down sidewalks or driveways, only watering lawns at specific times of day for no more than two hours, or not watering at all if there is a water shortage.

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