

Chapter 13

Government Relations—Providing Safe Drinking Water in Northern Settlements

1.0 MAIN POINTS

By January 2026, the Ministry of Government Relations strengthened its processes to provide safe drinking water to seven northern settlements by fully implementing the two outstanding recommendations we first made in 2012.

The Ministry remedied the long-standing boil water order for Uranium City, which had a precautionary drinking water advisory in place since May 2001, and an emergency boil water order in place since February 2015. The Ministry addressed water system inadequacies in Uranium City by installing a new drinking water system. As of February 9, 2026, the Ministry had no emergency boil water orders or precautionary drinking water advisories in place for any of the seven northern settlements to which it provides drinking water.

The Ministry began tracking maintenance activities for water systems in an IT system in 2024. It also leveraged a third-party consultant to sufficiently supervise whether water system operators complete necessary maintenance activities (e.g., fix leaks, calibrate monitors). We found 92% of the required maintenance activities marked complete from February 2024 to January 2026. Completing timely maintenance reduces the risk of adverse affects on the water quality and water supply to northern settlements.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Providing Safe Drinking Water to Northern Settlements

The Ministry of Government Relations is responsible for providing safe drinking water to Saskatchewan's northern settlements using various water systems.

The Water Security Agency sets provincial water quality and system standards in *The Environmental Management and Protection Act, 2010*, and *The Waterworks and Sewage Works Regulations*. The Agency also issues permits to the Ministry to operate drinking water systems in northern settlements.

As shown in **Figure 1**, the Ministry owns and operates drinking water systems in five settlements, and it obtains drinking water for two settlements through contracts with First Nations communities.¹

¹ Other northern settlements without water systems were outside the scope of our original audit and subsequent follow-up audits.

**Figure 1—Drinking Water Systems for Northern Settlements at January 2026**

Northern Settlement	Estimated Population ^A	Type of Drinking Water System
Ministry-owned Water Systems		
Bear Creek	45	The Ministry transports drinking water from its water treatment plant at Bear Creek to residents' homes
Brabant Lake	27	Residents contract a private company to transport drinking water from the Ministry's water treatment plant at Brabant Lake to residents' homes
Missinipe	27	Ministry pipeline distribution from its water treatment plant at Missinipe to residents' homes
Sled Lake	24	Ministry pipeline distribution from its water treatment plant at Sled Lake to residents' homes
Uranium City	91	Ministry bottle-fill reverse osmosis water system
First Nations-owned Water Systems with Ministry Contracts		
Stanley Mission	104	Ministry pipeline distribution from a nearby First Nation water treatment plant to off-reserve northern settlement residents' homes
Wollaston Lake	96	Ministry pipeline distribution from a nearby First Nation water treatment plant to off-reserve northern settlement residents' homes

Source: Ministry of Government Relations records.

^A Estimated permanent population information from Government of Canada 2021 Census data, www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/search-recherche/lst/results-resultats.cfm?Lang=E&GEOCODE=47 (23 February 2026).

The Minister of Government Relations functions as the municipal council for each of the northern settlements.² As the municipal council for each settlement, the Ministry must work within the legislative framework established for drinking water.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our fifth follow-up audit of the Ministry's actions on the recommendations we first made in 2012.³

We concluded, for the period ended March 31, 2012, the Ministry of Government Relations did not have effective processes to provide safe drinking water to seven northern settlements in the Northern Saskatchewan Administration District. By January 2024, the Ministry implemented eight out of 10 original recommendations.⁴

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Ministry's progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. Ministry management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

To carry out our follow-up audit, we examined management records relating to maintaining water systems used to provide drinking water, examined related monitoring activities, and reviewed other supporting documentation. We also interviewed relevant Ministry staff and management responsible for the provision of drinking water to northern settlements.

² The Minister of Government Relations' responsibilities are set out in *The Northern Municipalities Act, 2010*.

³ *2012 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 12*, pp. 111–125

⁴ *2016 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 24*, pp. 257–267; *2019 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 25*, pp. 263–271; *2021 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 15*, pp. 189–197; and *2024 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 11*, pp. 157–167.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at January 31, 2026, and the Ministry of Government Relations' actions up to that date.

3.1 No Boil Water Advisories Remain

We recommended the Ministry of Government Relations take prompt action to address problems in providing safe drinking water to northern settlements. (2012 Report – Volume 1, p. 122, Recommendation 10; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 13, 2014)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Government Relations took action to address problems in providing safe drinking water to northern settlements.

The Water Security Agency rescinded the long-standing drinking water advisory for the northern settlement of Uranium City and, as of February 9, 2026, the Ministry has no emergency boil water orders or precautionary drinking water advisories in place for any of the seven northern settlements to which it provides drinking water.

The Water Security Agency issued a precautionary drinking water advisory for Uranium City in May 2001, and the Saskatchewan Health Authority issued an emergency boil water order in February 2015.^{5,6,7} The advisory noted that the Uranium City water treatment plant had inadequate disinfection residual in the distribution system with E.coli detected in the drinking water system.^{8,9}

In October 2024, the Ministry installed a bottle-fill reverse osmosis water system to replace the water treatment plant as the source of potable water in Uranium City. Further, the Water Security Agency issued a waterworks permit to operate a hygienic (non-potable) waterworks in Uranium City in December 2025. The Ministry uses the old waterworks distribution service to provide water for bathing only and it is no longer considered a drinking water system.

Taking corrective action to resolve drinking water quality issues is essential to ensure the safety of water consumed by northern settlement residents.

⁵ The Water Security Agency issues precautionary drinking water advisories where drinking water quality problems may exist, but where it has not identified an immediate public health threat. Under a precautionary drinking water advisory, water must be boiled before used for drinking purposes or used for other activities where it could be consumed, such as brushing teeth, dishwashing, or washing produce. The Ministry of Environment publicly lists all active advisories: www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/environment-public-health-and-safety/environmental-health/water-and-wastewater-management/advisories-and-warnings (23 February 2026).

⁶ The Saskatchewan Health Authority issues emergency boil water orders when a confirmed threat to public health exists (i.e., microbial contamination): www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/environment-public-health-and-safety/environmental-health/water-and-wastewater-management/advisories-and-warnings (23 February 2026).

⁷ The Ministry of Government Relations assumed responsibility for the water system in Uranium City in 1984.

⁸ waterquality.saskatchewan.ca/GoCReports/EnvActive.pdf (23 February 2026).

⁹ E. coli is a group of bacteria that can cause infections in a person's gut, urinary tract, and other parts of the body. publications.saskatchewan.ca/api/v1/products/114884/formats/129879/download (23 February 2026).



3.2 Water System Maintenance Properly Monitored

We recommended the Ministry of Government Relations consistently carry out all required maintenance for its water systems. (2012 Report – Volume 1, p. 117, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement January 13, 2014)

Status—Implemented

The Ministry of Government Relations sufficiently supervises and monitors water system maintenance.

As described in **Figure 2**, the Ministry uses various processes to supervise maintenance of the five Ministry-owned and operated water systems as well as for the two water systems operated by First Nations communities. Key aspects of its processes include receiving bi-annual consultant reports on the condition of each water system and periodic inspection reports from its regulator, the Water Security Agency.

Figure 2—Processes to Supervise Maintenance of Water Systems

- For **First Nations owned and operated water systems**, through its contract with each First Nation community, the Ministry makes the relevant First Nation communities responsible for all routine system maintenance. The Ministry does not receive detailed maintenance records to confirm whether operators conduct this system maintenance. Instead, Ministry staff review the twice-annual consultant reports to monitor each community's completion of maintenance.
- For **Ministry-owned water systems**, the Ministry engages its consultant to review the detailed maintenance records of the water systems and report twice annually. Ministry staff review these consultant reports to determine whether each operator completed proper maintenance.
- For **both types of water systems**, the Ministry engages an infrastructure management consultant to report bi-annually on the condition of each water system. The Ministry reviews these reports along with periodic regulatory inspection reports of the Water Security Agency, both of which report on the condition of each of water system.[^] The Ministry's infrastructure management consultant visits each water system location to ensure operators complete expected maintenance as planned.

Source: Adapted from Ministry of Government Relations' information.

[^] Inspection reports available at waterquality.saskatchewan.ca/DrinkingWater (22 April 2026).

The Ministry continues to contract a third-party infrastructure management consultant to advise on maintenance expectations, supervise water systems, and monitor whether the operators consistently carry out required maintenance for each water system.

The Ministry's infrastructure management consultant reviews the maintenance records prepared by operators of Ministry-owned and operated water systems during site visits (twice a year) to ensure good recordkeeping at all drinking water facilities. The Ministry's public works manager also visits each water system location to help ensure operators complete expected maintenance as planned.

Since our last follow-up audit in 2024, the Ministry started tracking its maintenance information digitally (in an IT system called Maintain X). The IT system logs and tracks maintenance, which allows the Ministry to better monitor if, and when, operators conduct key maintenance activities at the water treatment plants. From February 1, 2024, to January 31, 2026, the Ministry logged a total of 299 required maintenance activities for all seven northern settlement water systems. We found 92% of the required maintenance activities marked complete.

We also tested a sample of consultant reports the Ministry received and reviewed. We found in three of four settlements tested, maintenance issues were noted in both 2025 consultant reports. However, the Water Security Agency did not include them as non-compliant maintenance issues in its latest inspection reports, indicating the issues were more minor in nature.

Properly monitoring completion of maintenance reduces the risk that water quality and supply to northern settlements could be adversely affected.

