

Water fees 'a nightmare'

Kristen Holliday - Mar 6, 2022 / 4:00 am

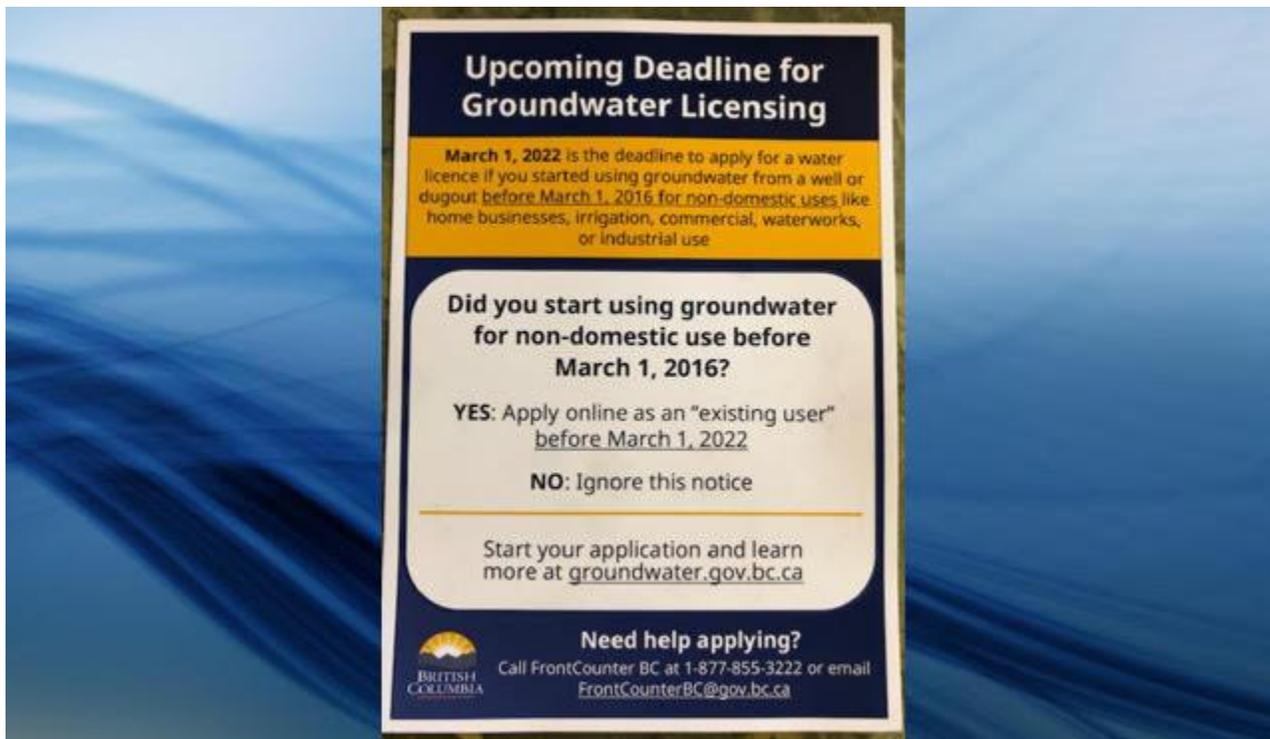


Photo: Linda Dahn

A Barriere woman was surprised to find out she would have to pay more than \$1,300 in backdated fees as part of the B.C. government's new groundwater licensing process.

A Barriere woman says she has lost sleep after learning the B.C. government will charge her more than \$1,300 in backdated fees as new groundwater licensing requirements come into effect.

Linda Dahn, who owns a small home-based dog grooming business in Barriere, said she received a flyer in the mail on Feb. 8 notifying her that she had until March 1 to apply for a water license.

Dahn said she was advised that, as a non-domestic groundwater well user, she would need to pay \$1,376.76 in water rental fees backdated to 2016 — when the province's Water Sustainability Act came into effect.

"It's a nightmare, that amount of money to backpay," Dahn said.

She said she is semi-retired, with her grooming shop Ruff Cuts bringing in about \$28,000 annually. She said the business only uses a small amount of water each year.

"I could see it if I had a brewery or I was irrigating a whole bunch of property and growing things, but that's not what's happened here. So I sort of feel they haven't taken a look at what they're doing," Dahn said.

According to the province, the change to the groundwater licensing system came into force with the Water Sustainability Act on Feb. 29, 2016. The past six years have been a transition period to bring non-domestic groundwater users into the new system.

The Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations and Rural Development said the licensing system will help to inform the province's water management decisions as the demand for water increases. It will also help to ensure fair access to water.

If someone uses groundwater for non-domestic purposes — such as irrigation, commercial and industrial use — they must apply for a water license and pay water fees. The application deadline for existing groundwater users was March 1.

The ministry said application and water rental fees were set after researching systems in other provinces, and engaging with the public.

The ministry said most licensees pay a rate based on the volume they have licensed, with the rental increasing as more water is licensed.

“Transitioning groundwater users are required to pay for their authorized water use out of fairness to surface water users who have paid rentals for their use during that period. The back-rental requirement results in all authorized water users being treated fairly,” the ministry said.

Dahn said she wishes she had more notification of the March 1 deadline and associated fees, saying no one on her block had any idea this was happening until early February.

“I nearly fell over and I haven't slept nights, I am so upset,” she said.

“I have gone to the ombudsperson's office. I've gone to the Auditor General, I've gone to my MLA. ... I worked within municipal governance over 20-some years and all the years I worked there, I never saw anything this bad go out.”

Peter Milobar, BC Liberal MLA for Kamloops-North Thompson, said the implementation of the groundwater licensing system has been “a mess,” saying there should have been more of a notification process around the implementation.

He said as of Feb. 28 — the day before the application deadline — tens of thousands of people haven't yet registered, and the government hasn't agreed to extend the deadline.

“People are finding out there's this back payment that's owed as well. The minister will say that they've tried to make corrections to the application process to make it easier, but it's still taking people upwards of 10 hours, hopefully if they have internet access, to go online and try to provide the information,” Milobar said.

“Last week we asked again to try to get an extension, because people are trying to do the right thing, but they're finding it very punitive, both financially and time and process-wise, to actually get their wells registered.”

Dahn said ideally, she would like the government to reconsider their approach for small, home-operated businesses.

“I would like them to take the home businesses that have done the applications — a situation like mine — set them aside, and take a look at the water usage and see if they actually even need to be covered under this,” she said.

“They're concerned about volumes of water. I'm not using volumes of water.”