

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Rachel Perkins, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, May 28, 2025.

The water from your tap in Port Townsend travels 30 miles through the Olympic Gravity Water System (OGWS), from the Big Quilcene River watershed to the homes and businesses within the city. Water is also provided to Port Townsend Paper Corporation, Glen Cove, and parts of the unincorporated area west of town. With no streams or rivers, Port Townsend did not have a source of good drinking water until about 1928, when the City issued a bond with the Port Townsend Paper Corporation to build the OGWS. The OGWS replaced the Snow Creek water system provided by the Spring Valley Water Company (SVWC), originally pulling from a well near a pond at F Street and San Juan Avenue. In 1904, the City acquired SVWC and built the Snow Creek Diversion, a 20-mile wood stave pipe, built with tongue and groove joints at staggered lengths.

The Paper Mill was constructed in 1927 and quickly exceeded the water system's capacity. The City and Mill collaboratively built the OGWS in 1928, pulling from the 37,361 acres of pristine watershed in the Olympic Mountains that drain into the Big Quilcene River watershed. Providing an average daily flow of twelve million gallons per day, the system's design includes the City Lake outlet system, a 144-million-gallon raw water equalization reservoir, and is one of Washington's oldest water systems.

Between the 1950s and 70s, the OGWS was improved by replacing the wood stave pipe with steel pipe. By 1956, they installed the Little Quilcene Diversion, a one-mile pipeline to the Lord's Lake Reservoir, which provides 500 million gallons of raw water storage. Today, rehabilitation of the Big Quilcene Diversion is necessary as much of the system is reaching the end of its design life. In considering this project, the City and the Mill are focusing on a management and replacement strategy for the next 100 years. City Manager John Mauro said, "We worked through an agreement in 2021 that really substantively changed how we and the Mill think about both the operation of the line and investment into the future." Currently, the OGWS provides 10 million gallons of raw water to the Mill for industrial purposes and one to two million gallons to the pressurized membrane ultrafiltration Water Treatment Facility for public use, treating water through a synthetic membrane system. "We've had an enduring, fantastic partnership with the Port Townsend Paper Company and the Mill, but neither we, nor the Mill, ever really paid into the replacement of the line. And I believe the last substantive negotiation of the contract was in 1956," Mauro said. A preliminary estimate of the work needed to maintain the pipeline system over the next 40 years amounts to approximately 161 million dollars.

Drought is a concern every year. The City Lake and Lords Lake reservoirs provide essential storage for when stream flows decrease during the dry season. Water use in the city goes from one million gallons per day to two million gallons per day during the dry period of the year. The Mill is required to shut down if there is a water shortage. In the drought of 2015, the Mill shut down one paper machine and almost needed to curtail their operations again during the drought last year.

Director of Public Works Steve King stressed that while there isn't a risk of a water shortage for Port Townsend residents, that doesn't mean it isn't important to be cautious with the supply. Additional water demand for new residents and a strong community interest in increasing local agriculture has put some pressure on the Quilcene-Snow watershed. Some of the City's main priorities regarding climate resiliency are to work within existing infrastructure and focus more on more dense development to avoid sprawl.

You can find the last three years of Annual Drinking Water Reports by going to the cityofpt.us website and searching for "drinking water report" (<https://cityofpt.us/publicworks/page/port-townsend-annual-drinking-water-report>). The report is released every May to the community.

Reporting on this story by Angela Downs.

KPTZ 91.9 FM brings you local news at noon and 5 Tuesday through Thursday, partnering on Wednesdays to bring you stories from jeffcobeacon.com. This is Rachel Perkins. Thanks for listening.