



URBAN AGRICULTURE & INNOVATIVE PRODUCTION POLICY PROJECT

Water Access

Local Policy Barriers and Strategies for Urban Agriculture

Water is essential for growing food, but urban farmers often face unique challenges in securing access to water. Unlike rural farmers who may draw from private wells or irrigation canals, urban growers typically depend on municipal water systems built for residential and commercial use. These systems are dependable but costly for agriculture. As droughts and extreme weather events increasingly strain water supplies—especially in cities already facing water scarcity—reliable and efficient water access becomes even more critical. Cities can support urban farmers by making water access options more transparent and affordable.

How Urban Farmers Access Water



PERMANENT MUNICIPAL CONNECTIONS

Installing meters and piping to tap directly into city water mains



HYDRANT PERMITS

Applying for city permits to temporarily access water via nearby fire hydrants



RAINWATER HARVESTING

Collecting and storing rainwater using barrels, cisterns, or tanks



RECLAIMED WATER

Using treated, non-potable wastewater made available by the city for safe irrigation



PRIVATE WELLS

Drilling a well to access groundwater, though most cities retain subsurface water rights within city limits



SURFACE WATER IRRIGATION

Accessing ditch or canal irrigation systems, typically managed by a local government authority like an irrigation district

CITY HIGHLIGHT

Los Angeles's Recycled Water Program

Faced with chronic water shortages, Los Angeles has invested in a recycled water program since 1979, when the city began irrigating two Griffith Park golf courses with treated wastewater. Today, recycled water is used across the city for non-potable purposes, including park and facility irrigation, groundwater recharge, and industrial cooling. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power also offers free recycled water at two public fill stations, where residents can collect up to 300 gallons per visit. While currently under utilized, this resource has potential to be valuable for urban farmers during drought periods, when outdoor watering with potable water is restricted.



Water Access Barriers and Policy Strategies

Urban farmers often depend on municipal water systems not designed with agriculture in mind, leaving producers to navigate residential rate structures, unclear permitting processes, and other restrictions that do not account for food production. Without a reliable source of water, urban farms and gardens simply cannot operate—making water insecurity not just a logistical hurdle but an existential threat to farm businesses and community gardens. Below are some of the most common barriers urban producers face in securing water access, with policy strategies that cities can adopt to address them.

COMMON BARRIERS FOR FARMERS

Farmers pay residential water rates that include sewer fees, or face tens of thousands of dollars to install a permanent water connection.

Hydrant access policies are unclear, and hydrant permits may be temporary or non-renewable.

Cities restrict outdoor water use during droughts, limiting or altogether cutting access to urban farms.

Farmers lack clear, accessible information and technical support, particularly when setting up a water source or applying for permits.

STRATEGIES FOR POLICYMAKERS

Offer agricultural water rates, subsidize connection costs, and provide other cost reductions through specific city programs (e.g. stormwater credits).

Tailor hydrant permitting policies and processes to be relevant to farmers and gardeners.

Provide clear exemptions for farms and gardens that need a steady supply of water to produce food.

Publish clear policies about water access for farms and gardens, and designate water authority or city staff members as points of contact to provide technical assistance and permitting support.

Best Practices for Farmers to Secure Water Access

- ▶ **Understand local water rates.** Review your local water utility's rate schedule and ask your water utility whether reduced rates or special programs are available for agricultural or irrigation use.
- ▶ **Explore access options.** Research the costs, requirements, and limitations of different water sources—such as hydrant permits, permanent connections to water mains, or rainwater harvesting systems—to determine what's most feasible for your site.
- ▶ **Look for green infrastructure incentives.** Identify any financial incentives your city or water utility may offer for green infrastructure, green space, or permeable surfaces.



This fact sheet is part of a series of resources on legal topics related to urban agriculture and innovative production. It was produced with support from the Office of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production at the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Want to learn more?

View the whole project at cafs.vermontlaw.edu/projects/urban-agriculture-and-innovative-production or scan the QR code.



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