

2023

NORTH CAROLINA WATER & WASTEWATER RATES REPORT





ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report is just one resource in an annual series on North Carolina water and wastewater rates, funded by the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality's Division of Water Infrastructure (DWI) and compiled by the North Carolina League of Municipalities (NCLM) and the Environmental Finance Center (EFC) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In addition to this report, there is an accompanying set of [tables](#) and [standardized water and wastewater rate information](#) for each participating utility. Furthermore, with the online, interactive [Rates Dashboard](#), users can compare utilities against various attributes such as geographic location, system characteristics, and customer demographics, as well as financial indicators and benchmarks.



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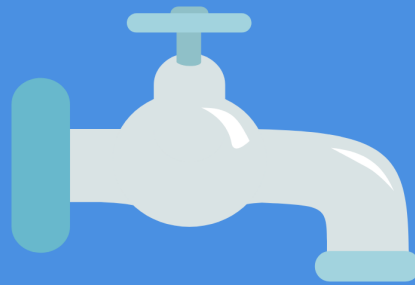
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4 Myths

About Water Pricing



1

MYTH: High Rates are Bad

FACT: Higher rates do not necessarily reflect poor or inefficient management. Some utilities may not be charging enough to properly maintain assets or have not re-examined rate structures.

2

MYTH: Comparing Rates is Simple

FACT: Rates alone do not tell the entire story. Rates should reflect the cost of providing service and can vary based on many factors. Comparing rates is really just a starting point for more analysis.

3

MYTH: Pricing is Simple

FACT: Utilities employ a variety of pricing structures and should be thoughtful in designing those structures to meet their needs, objectives, and priorities as they evolve over time.

4

MYTH: Promoting Conservation Requires Increasing Block Rate Structures

FACT: Many different types of pricing structures can be employed to encourage conservation, not just increasing block rate. Utilities should aim to focus on all aspects of pricing, not just rate structure design.

For more information on The Four Myths of Water Pricing, visit the original blog post at <http://efc.web.unc.edu/2015/02/12/myths-about-water-rate-setting/>

INTRODUCTION

Between October 2022 and February 2023 the EFC and NCLM conducted a survey of 513 rate-charging water and wastewater utilities in North Carolina.


A total of **498** utilities participated by providing their rate schedules, yielding a response rate of **97.1%** of utilities. Utilities from all 100 counties in the state are represented in this survey group.

Water and wastewater rate setting is one of a local government's most important environmental and public health responsibilities. This report aims to provide utility professionals and public officials with an up-to-date, detailed survey of current statewide rate structures and trends, and thus assist in the protection of public health, improvement of economic development, and promotion of sustainability in North Carolina.

Continue reading to find out how water and wastewater **rates** ultimately determine how much **revenue** a community has to maintain **vital infrastructure**.

BY THE NUMBERS

 **359** utilities serving
WATER AND WASTEWATER

 **108** utilities serving
WATER ONLY

 **31** utilities serving
WASTEWATER ONLY

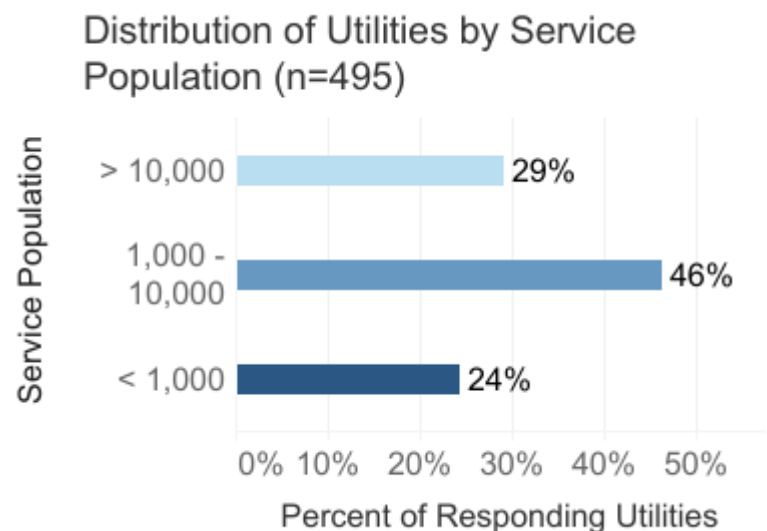
75%
MUNICIPAL

12%
COUNTY/DISTRICT

6%
NOT-FOR-PROFIT

7%
OTHER

Distribution of Utilities by Service Population (n=495)



WHAT DO RATE STRUCTURES LOOK LIKE?

Base Charges

Considerable variation exists in how utilities model rate structures, but almost all use a combination of a *base charge* and a *volume-metric charge*.


Base charges do not vary from one billing period to the next regardless of consumption. These charges can be a constant, universal amount for all customers, or vary based on customer class (e.g. residential vs. commercial) or even meter size.

Base charges sometimes feature a *consumption allowance*, which is a volume of usage included in the base charge.

Larger water utilities tend to have **lower** base charges than smaller utilities, likely because they are able to spread **fixed costs** across a greater customer base.

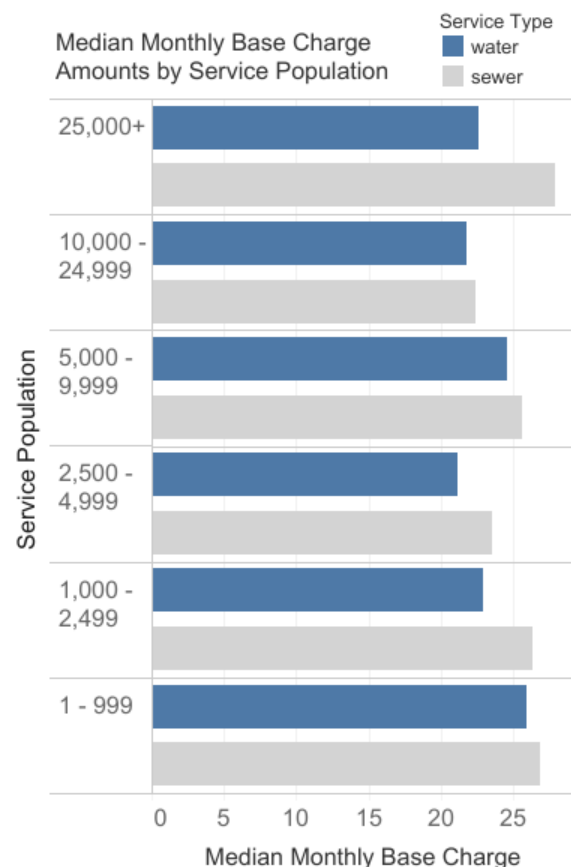
In North Carolina, **58% of water rate structures** with base charges included a consumption allowance. The median monthly consumption allowance is **2,215 gallons**.

Median Monthly Base Charge

\$22.10 
WATER

\$24.65 
WASTEWATER

\$39.83 
WATER AND WASTEWATER



WHAT DO RATE STRUCTURES LOOK LIKE?

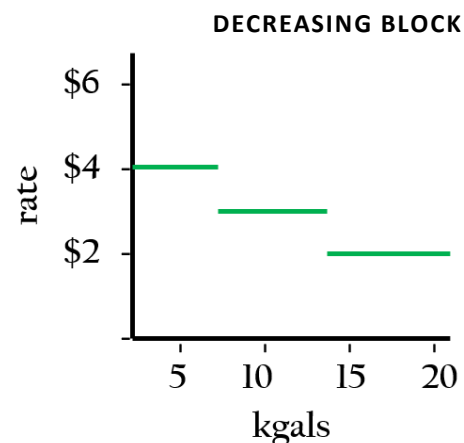
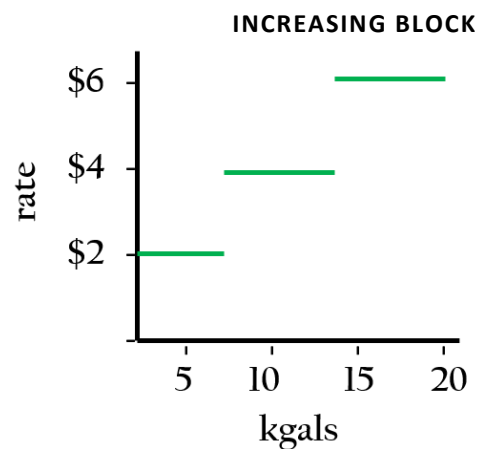
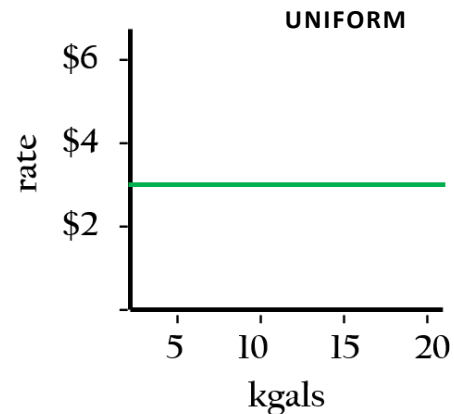
WAYS TO CHARGE FOR VOLUME

As mentioned, most rate structures are a combination of a fixed base charge plus a volumetric charge. Three common ways to charge for volume are uniform, increasing block, and decreasing block rates.

With a **uniform rate** structure, the rate does not change as the customer consumes more.

In an **increasing block rate** structure, the rate increases as the customer uses more. This structure is often employed by utilities that want to encourage conservation by making higher volumes of consumption more expensive.

The rate per unit decreases with greater consumption in a **decreasing block** structure. This type of rate structure may be used to encourage economic development, but likely will not encourage conservation.

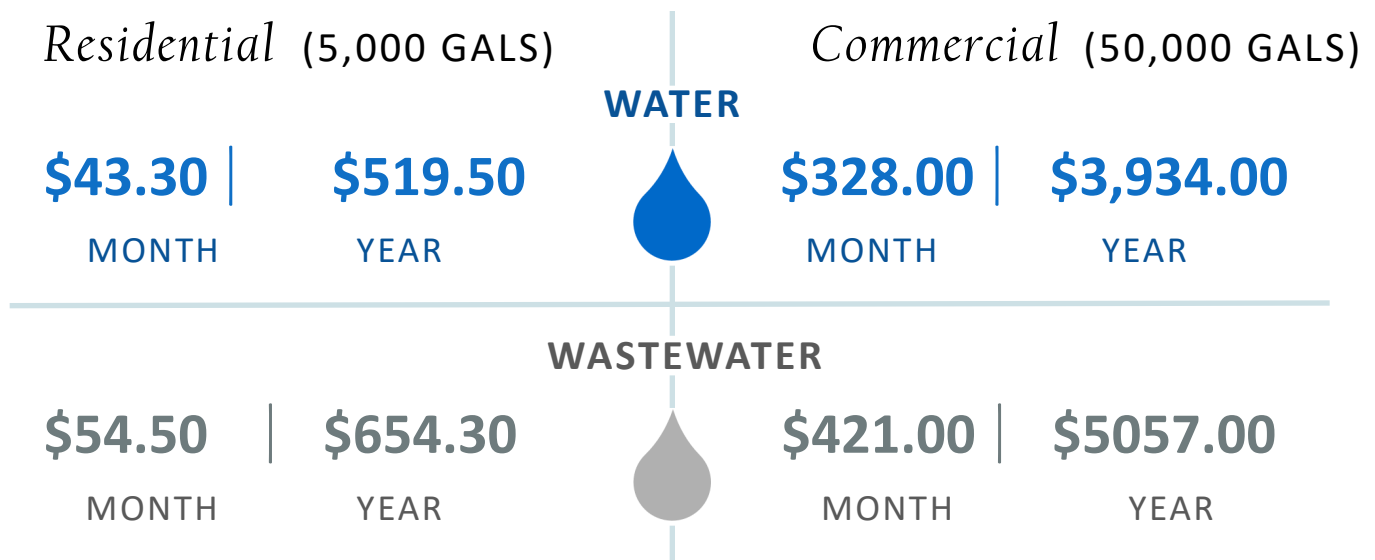


WHAT IS THE MOST COMMON VOLUMETRIC RATE STRUCTURE ?

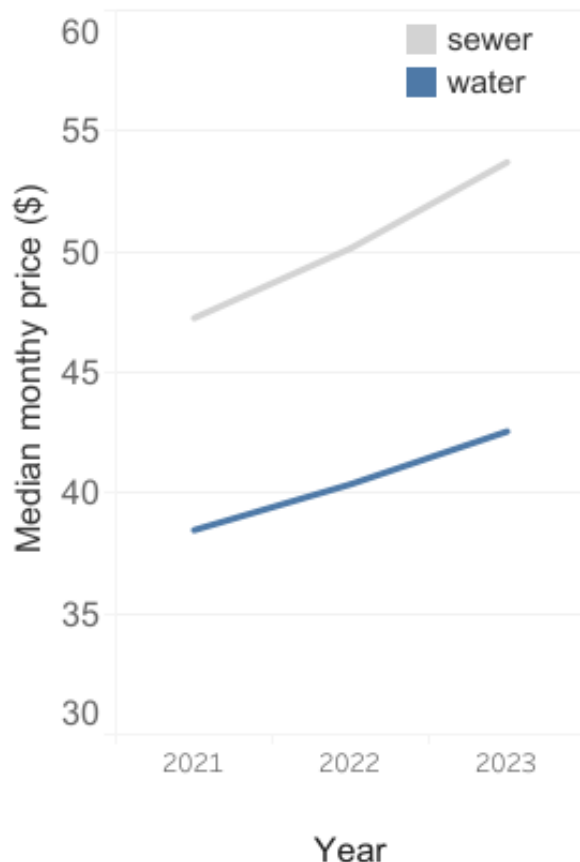
In North Carolina, the majority of residential water (57%) and wastewater (70%) rate structures use a **uniform rate** to charge for volume. Standardized to thousands of gallons, the median uniform rate is **\$5.99 for water** and **\$8.13 for wastewater** services.

WHAT ARE UTILITIES CHARGING?

North Carolina's Average Bills



Median Monthly Inside Bill
2021 - 2023 (5000 gal)



RANGE OF BILLS

The graph at the left shows the median monthly inside bill for both water and sewer at 5,000 gallons consumption. During the years 2021-2023, median water and sewer rates increased steadily. This reflects a change from 2020—2021, when median rates remained relatively constant, likely due to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

On average, sewer rates were 24.52 percent higher than water rates during this period.

HOW DO OUTSIDE RATES COMPARE?

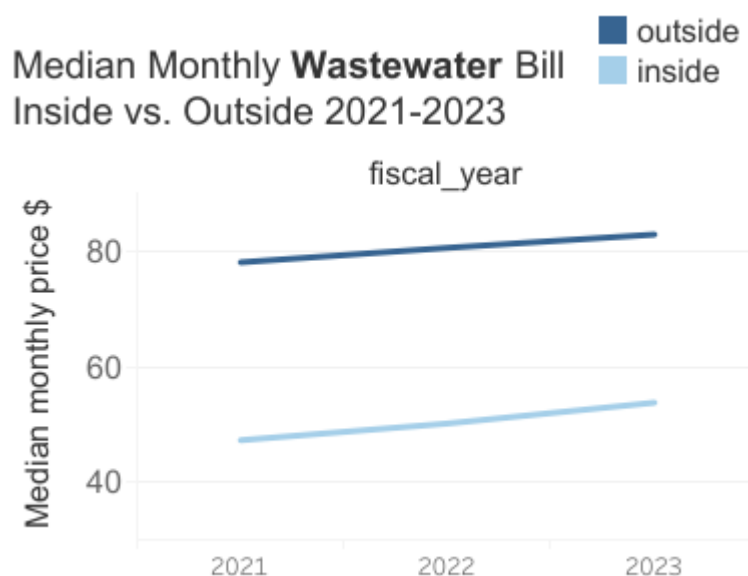
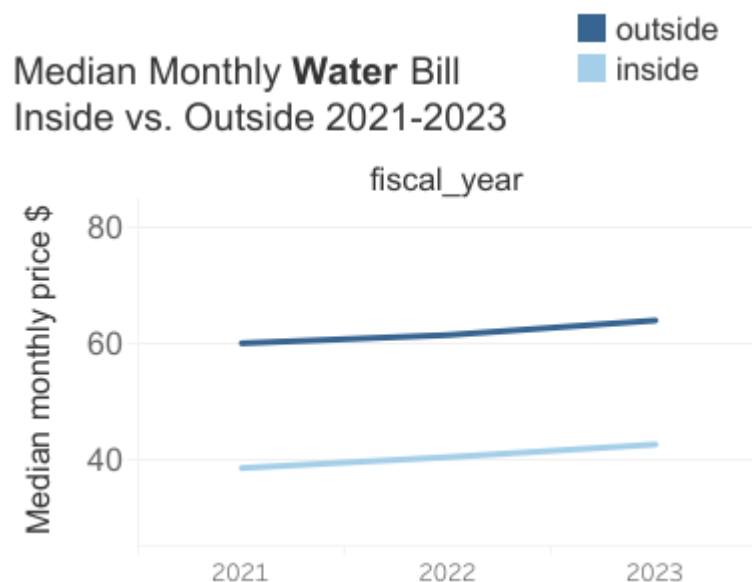
Inside vs. Outside Rates

All of the charges presented above refer to what utilities charge customers that live within their political boundaries. Municipal utilities often serve customers who live outside of city limits, and a handful of other utilities specify geographical boundaries within their service areas and identify their customers as residing “inside” and “outside” those boundaries. In many cases, utilities charge different rates for customers living inside or outside the boundary.

In North Carolina **57%** of water rate structures and **63%** of wastewater rate structures charge outside rates.

The median monthly outside bill at 6,000 gallons is 1.5 times the inside bill for water and 1.54 times the inside bill for wastewater.

The median combined water and wastewater bill at 5,000 gallons is **\$47.60** for customers inside service boundaries and **\$73.66** for those outside of service boundaries.

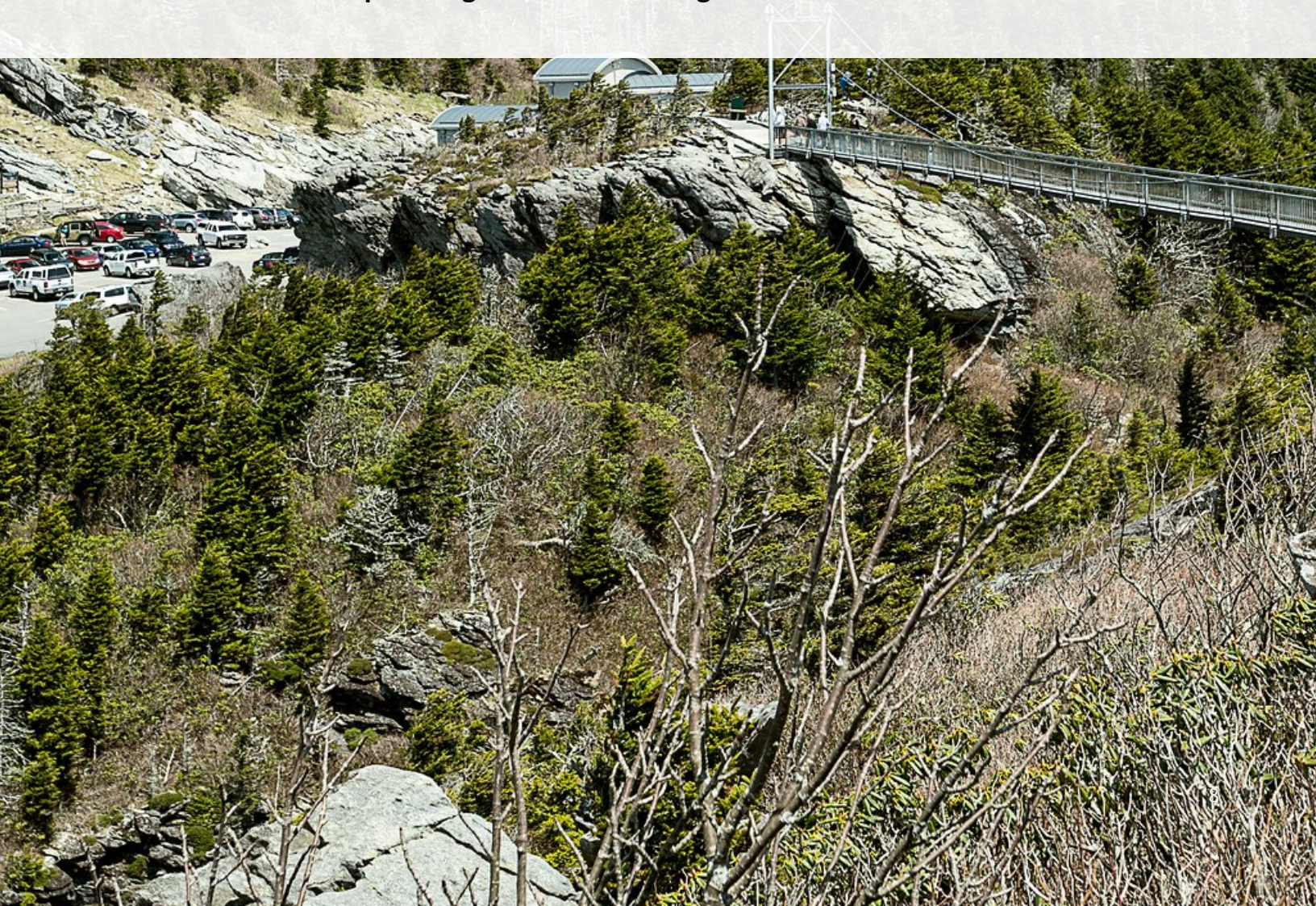


The graph above shows that on average, outside water rates are 53% greater than inside water rates. Generally, outside water rates are greater than inside water rates because customers reside farther, on average, from the water and wastewater treatment plant than inside customers.

HOW DO IRRIGATION RATES COMPARE?

Some utilities offer unique irrigation rates. When the same utility provides water and wastewater service, the wastewater service is often tied to metered water consumption. To separate outdoor water use, which does not go into the wastewater system, from wastewater use, utilities will sometimes meter separately for irrigation. These unique irrigation rates do not charge customers for the equal wastewater use and, as a result, are often slightly more expensive than water rates, but less than the combined water/wastewater rate if no irrigation rate existed.

In North Carolina, most irrigation rates are equivalent to water rates. Only about 12% of rate structures have unique irrigation rates. Approximately **69% of the 64 unique irrigation rates are greater than water rates.**



WHEN WERE RATES LAST CHANGED?

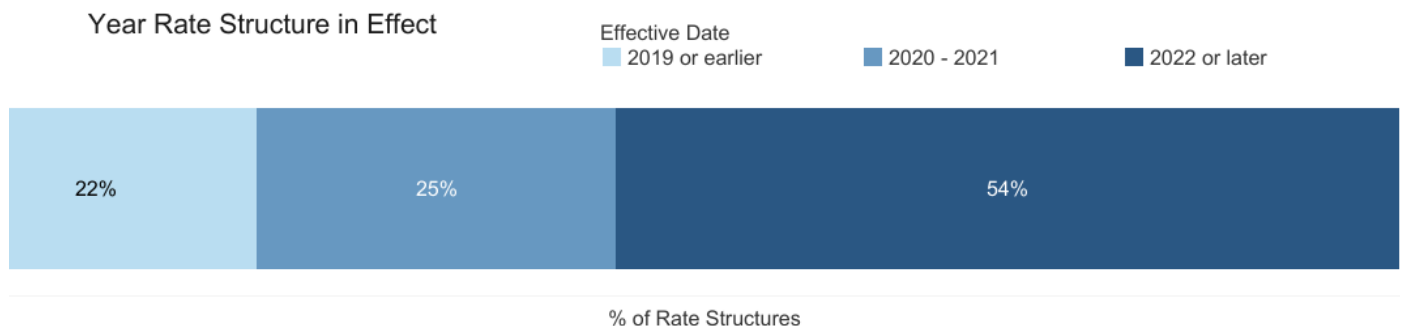
- The **MAJORITY** of utilities have updated rates as of **AT LEAST 2019**.
- Only about **1 IN 5** utilities have not updated their rates since **2019** or earlier.



In North Carolina **most utilities** are actively evaluating and modifying their rate structures every one to two years. The EFC recommends that utilities review their rates **at least every two years**, at the minimum, to keep in pace with inflation. An annual or biennial review gives utilities the opportunity to evaluate if their current rates are enough to cover the necessary operating expenses and depreciation, not to mention savings goals for capital planning, emergencies, or other funds.

Utilities that modestly raise rates at more frequent intervals accumulate more revenue over time than those that implement less frequent, but more drastic rate increases. Customers are also less likely to balk at more gradual, periodic rate increases than a one-time price hike.

The calendar year when sampled rate structures were first put into effect is shown below.



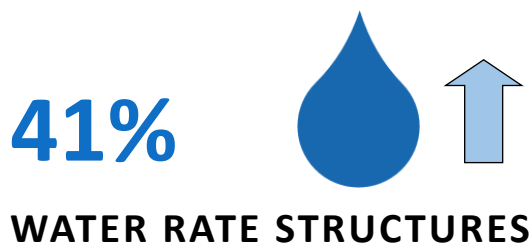
HOW HAVE RATES CHANGED?

The annual rates survey has been an ongoing partnership between the NC League of Municipalities and the EFC since 2006. As a result, years of rates data have been collected and are available to analyze trends and changes. As the costs of providing service rise, so should rates. Providing water and wastewater service is costly and infrastructure-intensive. Regular, predictable rate increases are common and recommended.

The **presence** of a change as well as the **level** of that change is important when assessing revenue needs for utilities. The figures below reflect changes in residential rates over the last fiscal year. Each figure reflects data from a cohort. The figures below only represent those rate structures present in both the 2022 and 2023 rates surveys.

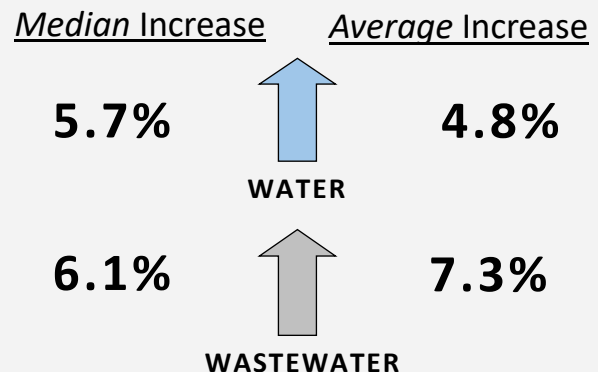
Percent of Rate Structures with Increased Residential Rates from 2022-2023

Water N=486 Rate Structures, Wastewater N=411 Rate Structures



Given that in most cases bills are quite low, a large percentage rate increase may not translate to a large dollar amount increase. **The median bill increase at 5,000 gallons for rate structures with increases was \$2.30 for water and \$2.90 for wastewater.**

Of Those Rate Structures with Increased Rates Since 2022 How Much Did They Increase?



DO PRICES REFLECT THE TRUE COST OF SERVICE?

Utilities sometimes fall into the trap of pricing services based on what their customers have always paid, rather than focusing on the bottom line of their balance sheets. This year, financial data were available for **299 utilities** out of the total 498 utilities (60%). Let's start with some essential definitions:

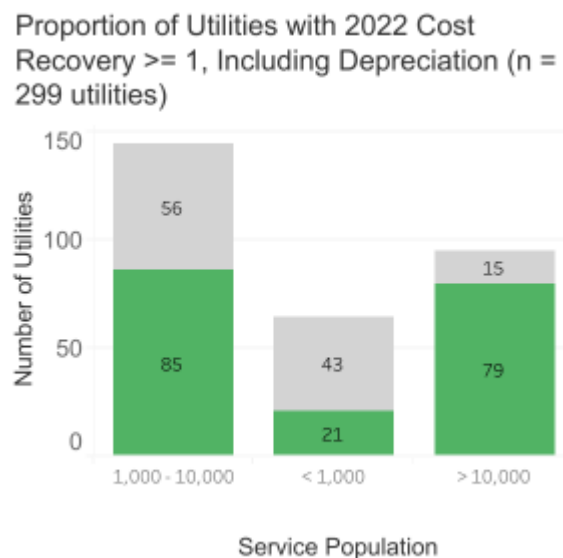
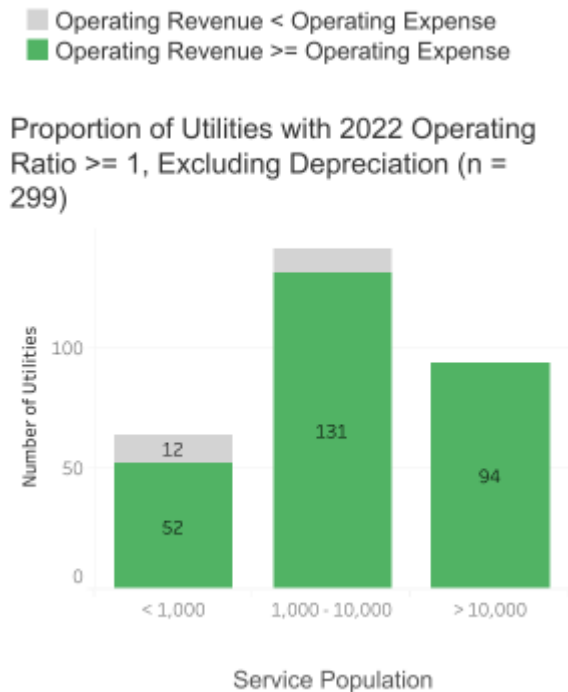
WHAT IS OPERATING RATIO?

Operating ratio, also known as cost recovery ratio, is a financial benchmark that determines if an entity is operating at a loss, gain, or just breaking even. The ratio is simply the division of operating revenues by operating expenses, which can include or exclude depreciation. A utility's operating ratio must be *at least 1.0* to break even.

WHY INCLUDE DEPRECIATION?

Whenever possible, depreciation should be included in operating expenses to account for the inevitable cost of replacing equipment and infrastructure at the end of its expected useful life. Depreciation allows costs to be figuratively parceled out over time, avoiding a sudden, enormous expense when the time comes to replace assets.

Consider the differences in the graphs below with and without depreciation factored into operating expenses.



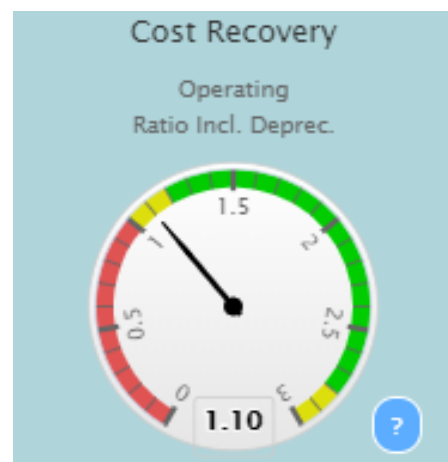
DO PRICES REFLECT THE TRUE COST OF SERVICE?

Without including depreciation, **277 out of 299** utilities for which depreciation data was available (94%) generated enough revenue to recover operating costs (operating ratio of 1.0 or greater. Of the utilities that were not able to recover expenses, all 22 serve 10,000 people or less.

With depreciation included, **185 of the 299** (62%) utilities generated enough revenue to cover operating expenses. All utilities face the issue of generating sufficient revenue to pay for the high fixed costs of providing safe and reliable services. However, smaller utilities must spread out those high fixed costs over a smaller customer base. 99 out of 114 of the utilities with an operating ratio of less than 1.0 serve fewer than 10,000 people.

WHAT IS CONSIDERED HEALTHY?

The Cost Recovery dial on the [Rates Dashboard](#) uses red, yellow, and green colored bands to give the viewer a simplified idea of the health of the utility's operating ratio at a glance.



While it is clear that being “in the red” is not a good position, there is no universal standard for what constitutes a healthy operating ratio beyond 1.0. Generally, as the Cost Recovery dial shows in the green band above, an operating ratio including depreciation of **at least 1.2** allows utilities to account for day-to-day operations and maintenance expenses, as well as for future capital costs.

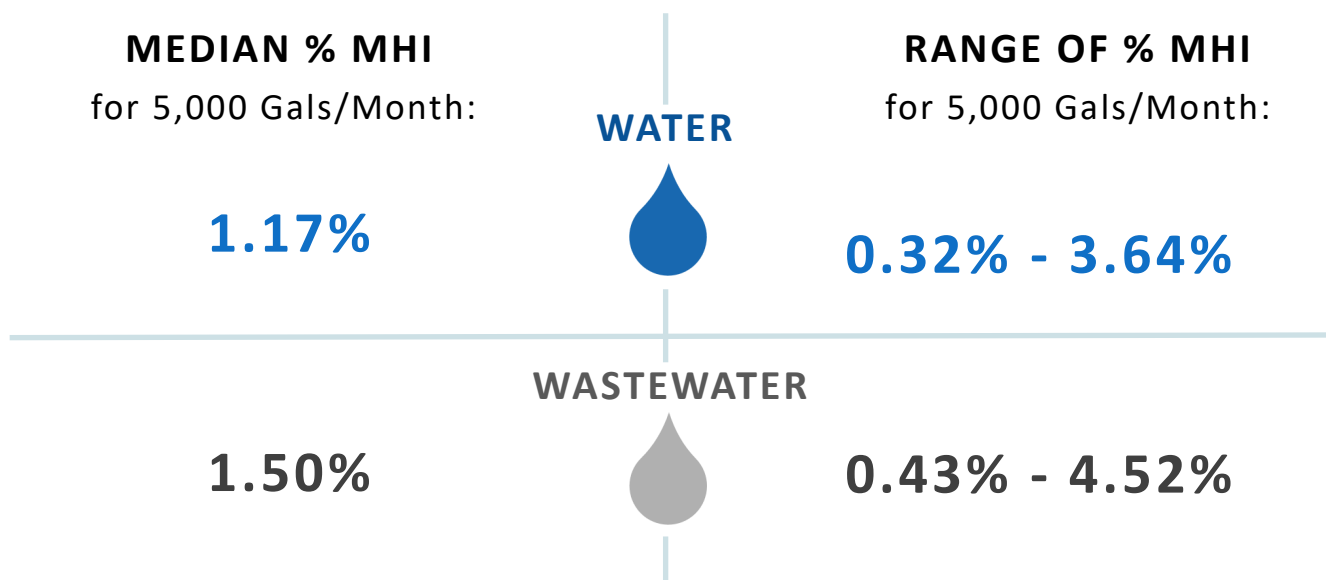
Just **29% of utilities** have an operating ratio including depreciation of **1.2 or greater**.

ADDITIONAL FINANCIAL DATA

The 2023 [Rates Dashboard](#) features more than 10 financial metrics, including **days cash on hand, quick ratio, asset depreciation**, and more!

HOW AFFORDABLE ARE RESIDENTIAL BILLS?

Assessing rate affordability remains a challenge, because there is no one true, universal measure of affordability. The most commonly used indicator, **Percent Median Household Income**, or “**Percent MHI**,” calculates how a year’s worth of water and wastewater bills, in this case 5,000 gallons/month, compares to the MHI of the community served by the utility. MHI is provided by the most recent 5-year estimates of the US Census Bureau’s American Community Survey.



As all communities have a range of income brackets, it is important to keep in mind that what may seem like a small percentage of the community’s MHI can have a proportionally larger impact on lower-income populations. This includes households making less than or equal to the **federal poverty guideline, \$26,200 in 2020 for a family of four**, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services. In North Carolina, the 75th percentile water bill and wastewater bill equates to about **1.45% income for water and 1.81% for wastewater**, respectively, at the federal poverty guideline.

As all communities have a range of income brackets, it is important to keep in mind that what may seem like a small percentage of the community’s MHI can have a proportionally larger impact on lower-income populations. For a more in-depth look at the affordability of water and wastewater services in a community, the EFC offers the free, Excel-based [Residential Rates Affordability Assessment Tool](#), available for download on our website.

Further Resources

All of the following free resources are available at:

efc.sog.unc.edu

2023 Water and Wastewater Rates Dashboard

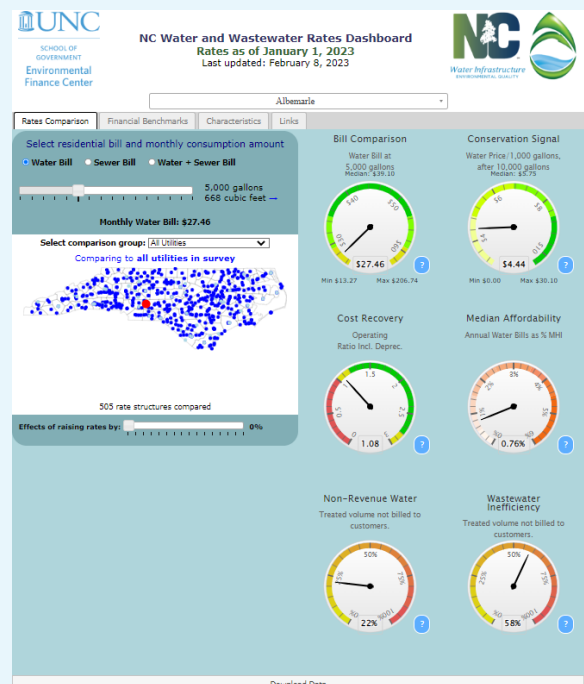
[Downloadable tables of rates and rate structures for residential, commercial, and irrigation customer classes for water and wastewater](#)

Tableau software tool with standardized [rate sheets](#) for all utilities in the survey

Need Technical Assistance?

Fill out the form below:

<https://efc.sog.unc.edu/technical-assistance/>



Questions? Feedback?



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Acknowledgments



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