

Keeping the Systems Running

Who operates the water systems, and how are their costs and future staff covered?

Christopher Knorr · Independent community briefing · Edited October 16, 2026

What this publication is—and is not. A public-document briefing with bounded conclusions and unanswered questions; not a technical water or fire-safety inspection, Tribal statement, or confirmation of current facility readiness. Checked primary records Oct 16, 2026 · other sources dated in the notes. Source-status notes matter.

The question

Who keeps the water systems working after construction is finished? Building an infrastructure system and operating it reliably are different undertakings. The Pit River Tribe identifies its Water Department as operating the XL, Montgomery Creek and Chimney Rock drinking-water systems. The Tribe also says that most of its certified water operators are nearing retirement. That is a reason to ask about training and succession—not evidence that a system lacks competent operators today. [R1]

A second question is how routine expenses are met. These can include operator pay, electric power, testing, maintenance, replacement parts and repairs. Federal construction assistance does not automatically cover a utility's operating costs. A September 2026 Government Accountability Office (GAO) report documents that national challenge and asks Congress to consider additional support. It is **not** an assessment of Pit River's finances or water quality. [R2]

This briefing examines what the Tribe already recorded about its operations, the applicable federal context, and the questions still requiring a current Tribal answer.

The published plan is more specific than previously reported

The **Public Water Systems / Water Department** section of the Tribe's **Strategic Plan 2020** , posted as a draft, gives a direct account of historical management concerns. It reports equipment limitations, a budget shortfall, concerns over water rates and collections, conservation problems, a need to train staff, and possible expansion. It also describes ambitions to earn more of the department's operating income and reduce dependency on general Tribal funding. These are the **department's published statements about 2020** , not established conditions in October 2026. [R3]

The draft sets identifiable objectives: obtain repair equipment, study rate options, conduct leak checks, explore grants and IHS work agreements, develop staff, and consider adding systems or wastewater work. It even contemplates **at least one trained and certified distribution operator for future expanded systems meeting the stated connection threshold** . That detail matters because an earlier edition asked whether any staffing plan had ever been written. One had: what remains uncertain is its adoption, progress and successor plan. [R3]

What the evidence establishes

- 1. **The operating role is public.** The Tribe says the Water Department operates its named public water systems, uses certified operators, and is updating operation-and-maintenance activities. [R1]
- 2. **Retirement is a published succession concern.** The Tribe reports most certified operators are approaching retirement. Its current number of operators, their coverage schedules, and actual retirement dates are not published in the source reviewed. [R1]
- 3. **The 2020 plan already contained workforce and revenue proposals.** The historical draft names training, equipment, rate collection, grants, and self-sufficiency goals. This contradicts any implication that no operator or operating-cost planning was ever recorded. [R3]
- 4. **A public jobs listing is not a workforce census.** The Tribe's employment page listed no water-operator or maintenance job among its government vacancies when reviewed for this edition. This does not show the positions are filled, unfilled, frozen, advertised elsewhere, or absent. [R4]
- 5. **Operator certification has a federal framework.** EPA explains that community systems must be run by qualified or certified operators and offers its National Tribal Drinking Water Operator Certification Program at no cost to eligible water-system personnel. This does not verify individual qualifications at Pit River. [R5]
- 6. **GAO documents a national financing problem.** The September 22, 2026 report finds Tribes often struggle with routine operation-and-maintenance (O&M) costs and operator recruitment. IHS generally does not provide routine O&M money; GAO describes a March 2026 court ruling and then-pending appeal concerning IHS's legal authority. Treating this complex issue as an absolute claim that federal help is legally impossible would be inaccurate. [R2]

What the 2020 water plan proposed

Operating need	Historical draft objective	What must be checked now
Repair and heavy equipment	Find and acquire equipment so water-main repairs need less outside support.	Equipment inventory, service contracts and downtime response.
Rates and affordability	Review rate levels and collections while considering household affordability.	Current rate schedule, low-income options, collections policy and annual budget.
Conservation and losses	Undertake a water audit, research conservation, and test distribution lines for leaks.	Dated audit results, losses, repair work and current conservation plan.
Operator succession	Prepare existing trainees and certify staff for contemplated expansion.	Current operator levels, coverage, trainee opportunities and next retirements.
Other funding	Research grants and possible paid IHS/other utility work.	Agreements actually signed and reliable recurring revenue.
Possible expansion and wastewater	Coordinate with Lands/Housing and examine wastewater facilities at XL and Montgomery Creek.	Which plans were approved, built, replaced, or withdrawn.

The draft recorded proposals and aspiration. **It does not demonstrate that the work was implemented** . Neither does a later webpage's statement about retirement demonstrate that no succession actions took place. [R3; R1]

Why the financing distinction matters

The national GAO report describes a recurring pattern: agencies invest in infrastructure, then a Tribe or other owner must finance and staff daily operations. Insufficient funds and operator turnover can cause premature deterioration. The report also notes that IHS can provide some training and technical assistance, and recommends considering a **pilot for routine operating support** . [R2]

That creates three practical questions, not a finding of local insolvency: **What are the current annual operating costs? Which revenues and appropriations pay them? What reserves or arrangements cover a bad year or a major repair?** A project budget for new construction cannot answer those questions by itself. The ongoing cost of a future facility should be named alongside its capital funding.

The 2003 IHS construction-criteria document remains useful historical program context, but **current policy, project terms and the GAO-described legal proceedings must be checked before describing IHS's authority categorically** . [R2; R6]

What remains unestablished

Question	Evidence needed	Authority or route
How many certified operators cover each system today?	Aggregate counts, certification/coverage levels; no individual personnel records.	Water Department.
What succeeded the 2020 training objectives?	Current training, recruitment and succession plan with dates.	Water Department / HR.
Who pays routine operating costs, and in what proportions?	Adopted budget, fees, transfers, recurring grants and other sources.	Finance / Council / administration.
What are the actual system-repair and asset-replacement reserves?	Non-sensitive summary of maintenance plan and replacement schedule.	Water Department / Finance.
What became of the proposed wastewater and expansion projects?	Project decisions, agreements, or final plans.	Water Department / Lands / IHS.
What current water-quality compliance record applies?	Current authoritative EPA public-system record and water-quality reports.	EPA / Water Department.

These are questions about **systems and accountable offices** , not about the job performance, health or retirement intentions of named employees.

Historical and current record

When	Source status
2003	IHS published the cited Sanitation Facilities Construction Criteria; terms may have changed since. [R6]
2020; posted 2021	The Tribe's draft strategic plan includes detailed Water Department staffing, rate, equipment and expansion goals. [R3]

When	Source status
2025	The draft source register cites tribal-operator training offered by RCAC; verify current course availability directly. [R7]
September 22, 2026	GAO publishes its national infrastructure assistance and routine O&M findings, including the court-litigation caveat. [R2]
October 16, 2026	Current public water and employment pages rechecked; staffing totals and current operating budgets remain unavailable to this edition. [R1; R4]

Who can answer what

The **Water Department** is the appropriate starting point for system operations, certification coverage, equipment and training. **Finance, administration and Council** , within their actual Tribal authority, can establish adopted budgets, fees and contracts. **EPA** explains applicable federal operator requirements and compliance information. **IHS** can describe actual sanitation-project agreements and assistance. **RCAC and other training providers** may explain current courses. **Congress** can act on federal legislation; a GAO recommendation has no legal force by itself.

A public question should not treat an office's absence of online data as evidence that it failed to act. It should request a dated summary the office is authorized to provide, recognizing that budgets, personnel and security-sensitive records may have disclosure limits.

A six-question card

1. **How many currently certified operators, by level, cover each water system, and what is the succession plan?**
2. **Which staffing and training targets from the 2020 draft were completed, revised, or replaced?**
3. **What annual operating expenses must each system cover, and what funding sources pay them?**
4. **Are fee schedules, affordability supports and collections procedures current and publicly explainable?**
5. **What equipment, maintenance and replacement needs are prioritized in the next budget cycle?**
6. **Who will publish the next dated update and how can members correct or supplement this record?**

The strongest answer has **an office, an action, a date, and an identified resource** . If the answer is not available publicly, ask what non-sensitive summary can be shared and when.

Sources and correction route

This is a combined **Tribal-source reading and national context briefing** . It does not supply operator head counts, working-condition reports, staff identities, fee ordinances, Tribal operating budgets or system-level compliance determinations. The 2020 draft's descriptive claims remain historical; the GAO report's findings remain national.

Source	Supports	Important limit
[R1] Pit River Tribe — Water Department	Operators, systems, retirement statement and O&M updates.	Undated; no current staffing inventory.

Source	Supports	Important limit
[R2] GAO-26-107178 — Tribal Water Infrastructure (Sept. 22, 2026)	National O&M financing, training and operation findings, March 2026 legal ruling/appeal, congressional option.	No findings about specific Pit River budget or operations.
[R3] Pit River Tribe — Strategic Plan 2020 (draft) , pp. 102–109	Historical Water Department projects, rate/collection concerns, training targets and proposals.	Neither adopted policy nor current status verified.
[R4] Pit River Tribe — Tribal Employment	Visible public postings at editorial check.	Web vacancies are not evidence of staffing levels.
[R5] EPA — Tribal Drinking Water Operator Certification	General certification requirements and free EPA program.	Cannot verify any named operator.
[R6] IHS — 2003 Sanitation Facilities Construction Criteria (PDF)	Historical construction funding and support framework.	Not a substitute for up-to-date law and signed project terms.
[R7] Rural Community Assistance Corporation	A training and technical-assistance provider named by the Tribe.	Current free courses and eligibility must be checked directly.

Corrections and new records: [Sources & Corrections](#) or [email the editor](#). Please do not send private personnel data. A material source change will be dated here and reviewed in the other parts.