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Overview of the Water Legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan: Key Regulations, Challenges and Development Perspectives

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Abstract

In recent years, the Republic of Uzbekistan has undertaken a large-scale modernization of its water legislation. The adoption of the Water Code serves to codify existing laws while introducing modern principles of water management. This policy brief presents the key provisions of Uzbekistan's current water legislation, analyzes the primary challenges and outlines perspectives for the development of the regulatory framework. The paper concludes with recommendations for further improvement of water legislation.

Introduction

Water resources are strategically vital for Uzbekistan as they underpin the nation's food security, energy production, and environmental stability. Although the country accounts for the largest share of the Aral Sea basin's water consumption (approximately 39%)[1], only 10-20%[2] of its supply originates within its own borders. The remaining water flows from transboundary rivers in neighboring states, creating a high level of dependency on external water sources and a significant vulnerability to climate change. Projections suggest a water deficit of 7 billion m³ by 2030, which would pose a critical threat to both the economy and local ecosystems[3].

Historically, Uzbekistan has maintained a water-use model driven by heavy agricultural consumption. The agricultural sector accounts for

[1] Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Irrigation in Central Asia in figures – AQUASTAT Survey – 2012. Rome: FAO, 2013. ISBN 978-92-5-107660-6 (print) / 978-92-5-107661-3 (PDF). URL: https://www.fao.org/4/i3289e/i3289e.pdf

[2] World Bank. Uzbekistan General Water Security Assessment (Report No. P170030). Washington, DC: The World Bank, 2023. URL: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099062424121035288/pdf/P170030-356bad97-a463-43e5-9ce8-fc808f542aeb.pdf

[3] Water as a National Wealth. Water Code Adopted in Uzbekistan. CAREC Information Portal. URL: https://centralasiaclimateportal.org/water-as-a-national-wealth-water-code-adopted-in-uzbekistan/

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approximately 90%[4] of freshwater consumption, with water usage per hectare being 2 to 2.5 times higher than in technologically advanced nations.[5] Historically, the perception of water as a free and inexhaustible resource led to widespread overconsumption and significant losses within aging irrigation networks. In response, the government has recently taken proactive steps to address these systemic challenges. For instance, under Presidential Resolution (PP-5 of January 5, 2024[6]), the agricultural water tax has been set at UZS100 per cubic meter. To incentivize efficiency, reduced coefficients of 0.5 or 0.7 are applied for users who implement metering and water-saving technologies. Conversely, those lacking such systems face a 1.1 penalty coefficient. Furthermore, comprehensive programs[7] are underway to accelerate the deployment of water-saving tech, modernize irrigation infrastructure, and foster a national culture of water conservation.

This policy brief analyzes Uzbekistan's current water legislation, identifies existing regulatory gaps, and offers strategic recommendations for its future development.

Modern System of Water Legislation

The cornerstone of the current legal framework is the Water Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan (Law No.ZRU-1076 of July 30, 2025) which took effect on October 31, 2025. This Code supersedes the outdated 1993 Law 'On Water and Water Use,' effectively consolidating fragmented regulations into a unified legal approach. Structured into 6 sections, 29 chapters, and 165 articles, the Code integrates provisions from eight prior decrees and fourteen resolutions within the water sector.[8] Its development involved an extensive comparative analysis of legal practices from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Australia, Vietnam, and Germany.[9]

The Water Code regulates the rational use and conservation of water resources, infrastructure, and protected lands. Pursuant to Article 11, water is proclaimed a national asset under state protection. The framework incorporates fundamental management principles designed for climate resilience, including long-term planning, prevention of depletion and pollution and reduction of harmful environmental impacts. Central to the Code is the requirement for an integrated basin and territorial approach, necessitating transparent, evidence-based management and public engagement. This commitment to IWRM principles is intended to harmonize previously fragmented regulations and streamline the governance of water resources.

The Water Code provides a clear definition of the objects and subjects of water relations. It introduces the concept of water bodies and classifies them into surface water and groundwater. It reaffirms that water is a national asset, subject to rational use and public protection (Art. 11). Furthermore, water users are recognized as both legal entities and individuals who utilize water resources for their own needs (Art. 4).

The Code distinguishes between general and special water use (Art. 7). General water use covers basic needs, including drinking and domestic needs, livestock watering, bathing, recreational fishing and the use of non-motorized small craft, and may be exercised freely without a special permit (Art. 54). Special water use involves the withdrawal of water through structures or technical equipment, the discharge of waste-

4 World Bank. Uzbekistan to Modernize Its Irrigation Infrastructure with World Bank Support.
URL: https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/05/21/uzbekistan-to-modernize-its-irrigation-infrastructure-with-world-bank-support

5 Daryo. Uzbekistan uses 90% of drinkable water for agricultural purposes amid concerns about water shortages in CA.
URL: https://daryo.uz/en/2023/08/04/uzbekistan-uses-90-of-drinkable-water-for-agricultural-purposes-amid-concerns-about-water-shortages-in-ca/

6 Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №PP-5 of 05.01.2024 “On measures to improve water management and use at the local level”.
URL: https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6734975

7 Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №PP-250 of 15.08.2025 “On approval of the 2025-2028 Program for Water Management and Irrigation Development in the Republic of Uzbekistan”.
URL: https://www.lex.uz/ru/docs/7686162; Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №UP-6024 of 10.07.2020 “On approval of the Concept of water sector development in the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2020-2030”.
URL: https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4892946; Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №UP-16 of 30.01.2025 “On the State Program for the implementation of the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy in the Year of Environmental Protection and Green Economy. URL: https://lex.uz/en/docs/7369745; Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №UP-158 of 11.09.2023 “About the Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy”. URL: https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6600404; Financing the Implementation of Water-Saving Technologies – suvkredit.uz; suvchimaktabi.uz

8 Water as a National Wealth. Water Code Adopted in Uzbekistan. CAREC Information Portal. URL: https://centralasiaclimateportal.org/water-as-a-national-wealth-water-code-adopted-in-uzbekistan/

9 The Water Code has systematized the core legal instruments in the sector.
URL: https://gov.uz/uz/suvchi/news/view/74425

water and the use of water bodies for navigation, hydropower, industry, etc. This category requires a permit if the daily withdrawal exceeds 5 m³ or if there is a discharge into water bodies (Arts. 55-56). Thus, quantitative criteria have been introduced to limit free water abstraction and prevent overuse.

The Code clarifies the powers of state bodies within the sphere of water relations. Management authority is divided among several agencies: the Ministry of Water Management is responsible for surface waters, while the Ministry of Mining Industry and Geology oversees groundwater (Art. 15). Local authorities also exercise regulatory oversight over water use within their borders, in accordance with their mandate. To ensure interagency coordination, Water Councils shall be established and include a Republican Water Council at the Cabinet of Ministers, as well as basin (territorial) and district level councils chaired by the relevant authorities (Art. 16). The Republican Council will be comprised of the heads of relevant ministries and agencies, along with representatives of non-governmental organizations, independent experts and scientists, where appropriate. This body is designed to ensure cross-sectoral integration and scientific evidence-based decision-making.

It is important to note that water is officially recognized as a strategic planning object. The Code mandates the development of state strategic programs in the water sector, as well as basin plans for water use and protection (Art. 28). Planning must account for climate change scenarios and economic development prospects to ensure sustainable water supply for the population, economic sectors and ecosystems. As early as in 2020, the President approved a Concept of Water Sector Development for 2020-2030,[10] which was followed by the 2025-2028 Program for Water Management and Irrigation Development.[11] These documents set targets for reducing water intensity of the economy, modernizing infrastructure and adapting to lower water availability.

An important innovation is the development of a single water information system (Art. 50). This system will collect and store all water data in a single repository, processing it to inform the water policy, sector's programs and development plans. The Ministry of Water Management is responsible for the maintenance and coordination of this information system. It is anticipated that such digitalization will enable real-time monitoring of water use, timely tracking of over-usage and assessment of the status of water bodies and hydraulic structures. Uzbekistan is already implementing a system for continuous remote monitoring of the seismic stability of dams[12], thereby enhancing safety of hydraulic structures. Furthermore, digital accounting will foster transparency in supplier-consumer relations and will serve as a basis for equitable water allocation.

The Code introduces economic and legal mechanisms aimed at optimization of water use, including distribution and incentivizing instruments. It defines water quotas and limits (Art. 4). A water withdrawal quota is the total volume allocated to water suppliers and users over a multi-year period. By contrast, a limit is the seasonal distribution of that quota, adjusted based on water availability of sources. This mechanism prevents water users from depleting their annual quotas prematurely, ensuring sufficient supply remains for dry periods. The Code also permits the transfer of saved water to another user within the same hydrographic zone on a contractual basis.

To support these economic and legal frameworks, the legislation incorporates cost-recovery mechanisms and economic incentives. Under the Tax Code, a water use tax is levied on quantity of water used for specific purposes (Arts. 441-448). Additionally, the Water Code established water delivery fees – effectively tariffs for water supply services – intended to recover irrigation maintenance costs and encourage infrastructure modernization (Art. 152). The irrigation water fee has been operational since 2024.

[10] Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №UP-6024 of 10.07.2020 "On approval of the Concept of water sector development of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2020-2030". URL: https://lex.uz/ru/docs/4892946

[11] Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated 15.08.2025 №RP-250 "On approval of the 2025-2028 Program for Water Management and Irrigation Development in the Republic of Uzbekistan". URL: https://www.lex.uz/ru/docs/7686162

[12] A Program for water management and irrigation development adopted. URL: https://president.uz/ru/lists/view/8378

Water accounting requirements have been significantly bolstered. Water users are now mandated to maintain digital water consumption logs, install meters, and sign monthly reconciliation statements. Additionally, water diversion points must be equipped with flow-control gates (Art. 49). The water use data for all activities is automatically synced with tax authorities and user records. These measures ensure transparent water consumption and robust state oversight, enabling tax authorities to verify water-use taxes and identify over-limit consumption.

Further, the Water Code details the system of water use charges. According to the Code, the water-use charges are categorized as follows: (1) water-use taxes; (2) fees for water delivery and other water-related services; (3) payments for the acquisition of water withdrawal quotas from other users (based on a quota re-allocation agreement); (4) additional charges for over-use (based on an agreement for above-limit water use or re-allocation of a share of water delivery obligation); (5) compensatory payments for environmental pollution (affecting water bodies and local terrain) (Art. 150). Notably, compensatory payments for environmental damage and penalties for unsustainable water use are deducted from the user's net profit, whereas standard charges are included in the cost of production to encourage reduction of water losses. The law provides for exemptions or rebates for specific categories, such as those adopting water-saving technologies. However, payment for water neither waives the obligation to use resources efficiently nor limits liability for full restitution of damages.

Water legislation prioritizes the protection of water bodies and the upholding of citizens' environmental rights. Under the Code, wastewater discharge into water sources is strictly prohibited unless it complies with environmental and sanitary standards (Art. 110). Addressing climate change, the Code introduces formal definitions for 'extreme water scarcity' and 'drought,' establishing specific operational mechanisms for such emergencies (Art. 145). Furthermore, it establishes a hierarchy of water use priorities (Art. 52): drinking, household, and medical care needs; sanitary-environmental flow needs; industry, energy, and services; agriculture, fisheries, livestock, poultry, individual homestead plots, with preferential allocation granted to users who have adopted water-saving technologies. Notably, the hydropower sector's needs are now aligned with those of agriculture, a crucial step for balancing energy generation and irrigation. Codifying these priorities ensures that, during water shortages, human needs and environmental health take precedence. These norms reflect broader constitutional and environmental principles. The Amended Constitution[13] guarantees the right to a favorable environment and mandates the sustainable use of natural resources. Furthermore, the 1992 Law on Nature Protection[14] remains a foundational framework for water bodies, complemented by various bylaws on aquatic ecosystem conservation. For instance, Presidential Decree No.UP-3286 of 2017[15] targets the protection of water bodies by implementing measures to prevent pollution and the siltation of reservoirs.

In addition to the Water Code, Uzbekistan's water legislation includes several sectoral laws that complement the regulatory framework:

- **Law on Drinking Water Supply and Wastewater Disposal (No.ZRU-784 of July 22, 2022)**[16] establishes guarantees for public access to high-quality drinking water and regulates the matters related to centralized water supply, wastewater and water-and-sewerage utilities. This law effectively updated the norms on drinking water, which were previously fragmented across various acts, and aligned them with modern sanitary requirements.

- **Law on the Safety of Hydraulic Structures (No.ZRU-865 of August 30, 2023)**[17] sets forth requirements for the operation of dams, dikes, canals and other hydraulic structures to prevent accidents and protect the public. This law was enacted following a series of incidents and filled the gap in the legal regulation of reservoir safety.

[13] Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan. URL: https://lex.uz/docs/6445147

[14] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan №754-XII of 09.12.1992 “On nature protection”. URL: https://lex.uz/docs/7065

[15] Resolution of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan №PP-3286 of 25.09.2017 “On measures for further improvement of the water protection system”. URL: https://lex.uz/docs/3356824

[16] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan №ZRU-784 of 22.07.2022 “On drinking water supply and wastewater disposal”. URL: https://lex.uz/uz/docs/6126866

[17] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan №ZRU-865 of 30.08.2023 “On the safety of hydraulic structures”. URL: https://lex.uz/docs/6588809

- **Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Administrative Proceedings** and the **Criminal Code** contain articles providing for sanctions for violations of water legislation. Specifically, administrative liability is incurred for unauthorized water use, water pollution, damage to water infrastructure and other offenses. Furthermore, the Criminal Code establishes liability for severe effects. For instance, the pollution of water sources resulting in harm to human health or the environment is punishable by measures up to and including imprisonment. Thus, the legal framework encompasses punitive measures, thereby ensuring the protection of water resources.

Current Issues in Law Enforcement and Directions for Increasing the Effectiveness of Water Legislation

Despite the adoption of the Water Code and its role as a systematizing instrument, a number of regulatory and institutional issues require further elaboration to ensure effective law enforcement.

1. Water scarcity and low water-use efficiency. The primary strategic challenge is the growing water scarcity against the backdrop of climate change and increasing economic demand. Over recent decades, the volume of available water resources has declined, with a projected shortage of up to 7 billion m³ by 2030, as previously noted. The causes include reduced runoff due to melting glaciers and erratic precipitation, as well as a high percentage of water losses. Approximately 40%[18] of water is lost between the source and the field due to canal leakage, seepage and evaporation from open ditches (aryks). While the Water Code enshrines the principle of rational water use and the promotion of water conservation, its implementation faces several objective constraints. As of 2024, water-saving technologies covered over 35% of irrigated land[19]; however, a significant portion of these efforts is fragmentary and fails to provide a systemic reduction in water loss across all stages of water use. Furthermore, the execution of the state program for subsidizing water-saving technologies has been hampered by limited budgetary funding, allocating only about 20% of the stated requirement[20].

2. Institutional interaction and coordination. The distribution of powers among several agencies creates a risk of regulatory fragmentation. Responsibility for surface water and groundwater, environmental standards, and limit allocations is fragmented across different agencies. This demands robust joint planning and data-exchange protocols. While the Republican Water Council is mandated to serve as a coordinator, its success will hinge on specific regulations and the quality of interagency cooperation.

3. Normative details and secondary regulation. Effective implementation of the Code hinges on implementing regulations to govern water quota transfers, water easements (servitudes), Water councils' activities, PPP frameworks, and the calculation of ecological limits. In particular, the procedures for using land underlying water bodies and harmonizing water and land rights require further clarification. While civil and land laws provide a broad framework, the absence of water-specific procedural norms creates enforcement gaps. For instance, when routing an irrigation canal through private land, the lack of a clear water-easement protocol forces parties to rely on general civil rules, which often overlook the technical and operational complexities of water infrastructure.

4. Enforcement, oversight and rights protection. While the Code prescribes sanctions for water-use violations, the procedures for documenting non-compliance, calculating excess consumption, and imposing fines remain underregulated. Furthermore, the liability of water sup-

[18] Eurasian Development Bank. Efficient Irrigation and Water Conservation in Central Asia. Reports and Working Papers 23/4. Almaty: Eurasian Development Bank, 2023.
URL: https://eabr.org/upload/iblock/632/EDB_2023_Report-4_Irrigation_eng.pdf

[19] Water-saving technologies helped to save 1.4 billion cubic meters of water in agriculture in 2024. Podrobno.uz. 2024.
URL: https://podrobno.uz/cat/obchestvo/vodosberegayushchie-tekhnologii-sekonomili-v-selskom-khozyaystve-1-4-milliarda-kubometrov-vody-v-202/

[20] Uzbek Forum for Human Rights. Uzbekistan's Water Crisis Spells Debts for Farmers.
URL: https://www.uzbekforum.org/uzbekistans-water-crisis-spells-debts-for-farmers/

ply organizations is less clearly defined. There is a critical need for detailed criteria regarding the fulfillment of obligations, compensation mechanisms for damages, and formal claims-review processes. The Water Code's provisions on protecting users' rights remain broad and lack the procedural granularity needed for effective enforcement. Specifically, the Code fails to establish sector-specific frameworks for pre-trial dispute resolution, the jurisdiction of authorized bodies, or statutory response timelines. Consequently, these matters are relegated to general administrative and civil law, which often lack the technical nuance required to address the complexities of water relations.

5. International relations and transboundary waters. The Code includes a dedicated section on transboundary waters, enshrining key principles of international cooperation. However, the internal mechanisms for fulfilling these obligations – such as prior notification procedures, transboundary impact prevention, and environmental flow requirements – still require granular regulation to align with international standards.

Collectively, these findings suggest that future legislative efforts should shift from merely filling legal gaps to bolstering the institutional frameworks and implementation mechanisms necessary to operationalize existing norms.

Recommendations for the Development of Water Legislation

1. Elaboration of secondary regulation. Accelerate the drafting and adoption of secondary regulations mandated by the Water Code. Priority should be given to approving frameworks for: special water-use permits and water quota transfer mechanisms; rules of procedure for water councils and the maintenance of the State Water Cadastre; standardized contractual forms for water supply and delivery. It is critical to ensure these acts are fully harmonized with land and civil law, particularly concerning water easements (servitudes) and legal encumbrances.

2. Institutional and procedural strengthening. While Article 15 of the Water Code delineates powers based on the object of regulation, practical implementation often involves overlapping jurisdictions. This creates ambiguity regarding lead authority and accountability. For instance, surface water withdrawal permits for special water use are issued by the Ministry of Ecology in coordination with water authorities, whereas groundwater permits fall under the Ministry of Geology in coordination with environmental bodies (Art. 56). Furthermore, granting water bodies for use requires coordination with several authorized bodies depending on the object's jurisdiction and state oversight is conducted simultaneously by multiple agencies within their respective mandates (Art. 26). Without unified coordination protocols, this fragmentation leads to duplication of functions and complicates enforcement. Given the Code's recognition of the interconnectivity between surface water and groundwater, it is essential to establish a clear hierarchy of powers and streamlined interagency procedures for licensing, management, and oversight.

3. Developing monitoring and response to water risks. Given the projected increase in extreme hydrological events, refining response mechanisms within the current legal framework is critical. While Article 145 of the Water Code outlines measures for extreme water scarcity and drought – such as temporary use priorities and restrictions – these provisions lack procedural guidelines for implementation. To operationalize Article 145, it is recommended to formalize a drought response action plan or a dedicated regulation to be triggered upon an official declaration of extremely low water availability. This framework should define coordinated measures, including dynamic limit adjustments, prioritized allocation for socially and ecologically sensitive needs, and pre-defined restriction criteria for specific user categories. Furthermore, strengthening ecological guarantees remains paramount. Although Article 6 prioritizes the protection of water bodies, the Code lacks specific quantitative parameters for resource distribution. Future regulatory efforts should focus on developing methodological benchmarks for minimum allowable environmental flows for major river basins, tailored to specific hydrological and socio-economic conditions.

4. Enhancing ecological culture and engaging the public. Legislative progress must be reinforced by a fundamental shift in societal atti-

tudes toward water. It is recommended to integrate educational programs at all levels, covering water law fundamentals and practical conservation methods. Simultaneously, public oversight should be strengthened to ensure compliance. Building on the existing incentive system for reporting violations, public environmental organizations should be invited to observe inspections, while water monitoring data must be made transparent and accessible online. These measures will cultivate a national culture of responsibility, significantly reducing wasteful consumption.

In conclusion, the modernization of Uzbekistan's water legislation must proceed in tandem with institutional reforms and educational initiatives. The new Water Code establishes a robust foundation, designating water as a strategic national asset that demands careful stewardship. Successfully implementing its provisions through multi-stakeholder engagement will ensure sustainable and equitable water management amidst mounting climate challenges. Ultimately, this framework serves as a vital guarantee for food security, public health, and the long-term ecological resilience of Uzbekistan.

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