

SAFER Drinking Water Advisory Group Meeting #2

Meeting Notes | May 24, 2023

Overview

The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Advisory Group participated in a half-day meeting that included discussions on the 2023 Needs Assessment Results, the draft funding process for Operations and Maintenance (O&M), the draft priorities for the Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP), and the SAFER website revamp. Staff shared written updates on previous and upcoming SAFER-related events and 2022-2023 legislation.

2023 Needs Assessment Results

The Division of Drinking Water presented the 2023 Needs Assessment Results. The presentation included updates on the risk and affordability assessments and was followed by a group discussion on assistance and funding prioritization and the use of demographic data. The following are the Advisory Group Members' recommendations:

Prioritization of failing systems for assistance and funding

- Consider streamlining funding agreement implementation to assist water systems with limited technical, managerial, and financial capacity in grant application and management.
- Consider the possibility of appointing a limited-scope administrator to manage water systems grants.
- Take into account delays in construction due to lack of material availability.
- As consolidations are not always possible because of rural agricultural environments, explore options for rehabilitating existing wells or drillings of new wells.
- Focus on failing systems with acute public health concerns.
- Address the need for clear information for the public to understand the difference between contaminated and unsafe water.
- Consider the size of water systems and prioritize systems that are not progressing toward sustainable solutions.

Risk Assessment and demographic data to define program goals and outcome

- Emphasize the importance of having data and an inventory of state small water systems, including the age of wells, water distribution and well storage capacity to facilitate well rehabilitation where needed.
- Provide sustainable and affordable solutions to maintain water systems.
- Allocate resources to mitigate the impacts of climate change and establish back-up systems for families.
- Reduce risks by developing additional sources, such as second wells.
- Positive feedback on the creation of a socioeconomic risk category considering county and census data.

Draft funding process for Operations and Maintenance

The Division of Financial Assistance presented the draft funding process for Operations and Maintenance. The SAFER Advisory Group Members had an opportunity to discuss the funding proposals in smaller groups. The following are their recommendations:

- Commend the approach to prioritize Tier 1 and case-by-case projects.

- Guidelines and funding have been positively received in the most challenged communities, encouraging further progress.
- Recommend including systems that are not on the failing list but have high affordability burden.
- Important to keep working toward the common goal of providing sustainable water systems that meet the drinking water standards and state requirements.
- Pay attention to systems that experience higher rates after implementing solutions, particularly in cases where affordability barriers are already a challenge.

Draft priorities for the Fund Expenditure Plan

The Division of Financial Assistance presented the draft priorities for the Fund Expenditure Plan. The Advisory Group Members had an opportunity to discuss the funding needs and solution types in smaller groups. The following are their recommendations:

Funding Need priorities

- Address the need for plain language that the public understands, avoiding technical terms or acronyms.
- Prioritize severely disadvantaged communities with highest affordability burden.
- Consider addressing water quality over structural issues.

System categories or solution types

- Emphasize construction for long-term solutions.
- Prioritize failing systems with acute public health violations.
- Allocate more for planning wells and state small water systems.
- Reduce expenditures on administrators redirecting engineering costs and prioritizing technical assistance on non-profit solutions.

SAFER website revamp

The Office of Public Participation asked the Advisory Group Members to help reorganizing the SAFER program webpage. The following are their recommendations:

- Suggest creating categories of available funding.
- Develop a webpage specifically for private well owners to easily access relevant information.
- Add testimonials or success stories to showcase potential solutions for the public.
- Feature videos and case studies with pictures of community environments.
- Provide the website in languages other than English.
- Create drop down menus to provide detailed information.

AG Member Announcements

- Jim Sullivan, a domestic well owner in Mendocino, has entered discussions with a Technical Assistance provider to help the community of well owners become a water system.
- Eric Orellana, from the Community Water Center, is advancing projects in the Central Valley and the Central Coast and planning a community tour and a racial equity conference.
- Ethel See Winchell, from the Dobbins Community, is in the final stages of an infrastructure improvement with the State Water Board involving pipe and tank changes, as well as design and construction budgeting.

Public comments

- Positive feedback on the meeting and the future of the SAFER program projects.

- Request clarity on the quality of drinking water in California and availability of information on safety and contaminants.
- Consider environmental pros and cons of having bottled water versus hauled water.
- Request a discussion on the topic of public drinking water fountains.

AG Attendance (P= present, A= absent)

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| Cástulo Estrada: P | Ethel See Winchell: P | Jennifer Hazard: P | Rami Kahlon: P |
| Chelsea Tu: P | Eva Dominguez: P | Kassy Chauhan: P | Rob Burroughs: P |
| Don James: A | Ileana Miranda: P | Kristin Dobbin: P | Sarah Rutherford: A |
| Erick Orellana: P | Isabel Solorio: P | Martha Curiel: A | Sergio Carranza: P |
| Esther Espinoza: P | James Sullivan: P | Michael Prado Sr.: P | Tonya Moreno: P |

State Water Board Attendance

Division of Drinking Water: Andrew Altevogt, Bryan Potter, Karen Nishimoto, Kristyn Abhold

Division of Financial Assistance: Jasmine Oaxaca, Jeff Wetzel, Matt Pavelchik, Meghan Tosney

Office of Public Participation: Alisha O'Loughlin, Brita Romans, Caroline Pradeau Fonseca, Luke Tia, Marina Pérez, Rachel Wittenberg

Office of Chief Counsel: Douglas Bojack