

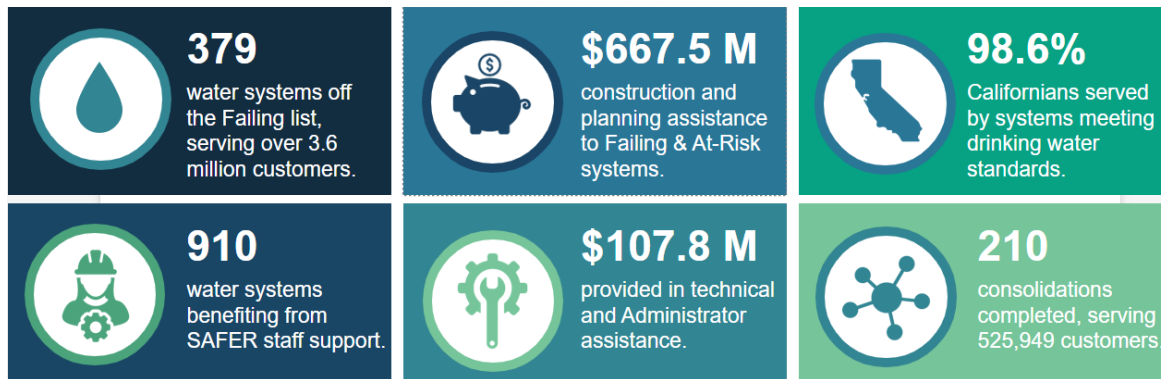


## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Human Right to Water (HR2W) recognizes that “every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking and sanitary purposes.” In 2019, to advance the goals of the HR2W, California passed Senate Bill 200 (SB 200), which enabled the State Water Board to create the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Drinking Water program (SAFER program). SB 200 established a set of tools, funding sources, and regulatory authorities that the State Water Board harnesses through the SAFER program to help struggling water systems sustainably and affordably provide safe drinking water. The SAFER program is driven by collective responsibility: water systems, non-profit organizations, governments, a community advisory board, and other interested parties work together to develop and implement solutions.

As of December 31, 2025, nearly seven years into the SAFER program, the State Water Board has awarded over \$1.27 billion in drinking water grants to disadvantaged communities across California, averaging \$181 million per year. This represents a significant increase from the \$310 million distributed in the five years prior to SAFER, which averaged \$62 million annually. In this same period (2019-2025), 379 water systems serving 3.66 million people have come off the Failing list and 210 consolidations, benefiting approximately 525,949 people, have been completed (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: SAFER Program Accomplishments (2019 - 2025)**



The Needs Assessment is a comprehensive, data-driven analysis that:

1. Identifies communities served by Failing public water systems;
2. Predicts which public water systems are At-Risk of Failing, and identifies state small water systems and domestic wells in areas of high risk;
3. Estimates how much it may cost to achieve the Human Right to Water for Failing and At-Risk systems and the communities they serve (last conducted in 2024 Needs Assessment);
4. Estimates the potential five-year funding gap between estimated funding needs and state funding availability (last conducted in 2024 Needs Assessment); and
5. Identifies disadvantaged communities that may be facing affordability challenges, which may limit their ability to address existing and future drinking water challenges.

The results of the annual Needs Assessment are used by the State Water Board's SAFER program and the SAFER Advisory Group<sup>1</sup> to inform the prioritization of available state funding in the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (SADWF) Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP) (Figure 2).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> [SAFER Advisory Group](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory_group.html)

[https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory\\_group.html](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory_group.html)

<sup>2</sup> [Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/sustainable_water_solutions/safer.html)

[https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water\\_issues/programs/grants\\_loans/sustainable\\_water\\_solutions/safer.html](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/sustainable_water_solutions/safer.html)

**Figure 2: How the Needs Assessment is Utilized by the SAFER Program**



The Needs Assessment serves to highlight and track progress in achieving safe drinking water in communities that have historically lacked access. It also serves to document the pace of implementing drinking water solutions, measure water system performance to encourage resiliency, explore sustainable long-term solutions like consolidation, and estimate the cost of implementing these solutions.

By incorporating this Needs Assessment into the SAFER program and implementation of SADWF, the State Water Board will continue to lead long-term drinking water solutions. At the same time, the Needs Assessment brings clarity to the amount and type of work that must be done by state, federal, local and stakeholder partners collectively to realize the Human Right to Water for all Californians.

## 2026 NEEDS ASSESSMENT RESULTS



**406**

**FAILING**

Public Water Systems

Population Served **645,279**

Receiving \$591 M in State  
Funding & Technical  
Assistance



**654**

**AT-RISK**

Public Water Systems

Population Served **1,795,865**

Receiving \$274 M in State  
Funding & Technical  
Assistance



**224**

State Small Water  
Systems  
in **AT-RISK** areas



**64,402**

Domestic Wells  
in **AT-RISK** areas

### KEY FINDINGS:

- 1 98.6% of California's population receives water from systems that meet drinking water standards in 2025.
- 2 Approximately 79.1% of Failing water systems serve disadvantaged communities and 53.9% serve majority communities of color in 2025.
- 3 Small community water systems charge on average \$33 more a month for the same volume of water compared to large water systems in 2025.
- 4 Approximately 91 (3.2%) community water systems face a high drinking water affordability burden and 372 (13.2%) are experiencing a medium affordability burden in 2025.