2026

DRINKING WATER NEEDS ASSESSMENT

CALIFORNIA Water Boards

JUNE 2026

Acknowledgements

Contributors

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Adequate Supply: means sufficient water to meet residents' health and safety needs at all times. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116681, subd. (a).)

Administrator: an individual, corporation, company, association, partnership, limited liability company, municipality, public utility, or other public body or institution which the State Water Board has determined as competent and performs the administrative, technical, operational, legal, or managerial services required for a water system to comply with Health and Safety Code section 116686, pursuant to the Administrator Policy Handbook adopted by the State Water Board. (Health & Saf. Code, §§ 116275, subd. (g), 116686, subd. (m)(1).)

Affordability Assessment: the evaluation of any community water system and non-transient non-community water systems serving K-12 schools serving a disadvantaged community to ascertain if it must charge fees, directly or indirectly, that exceed the Affordability Threshold to supply, treat, and distribute potable water that complies with federal and state drinking water standards. The assessment utilizes several indicators to identify communities experiencing economic challenges which make them unable to incur additional costs. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116769, subd. (a)(2)(B).)

Affordability Threshold: the designated values used to assess the economic capacity of a community or household to pay for current drinking water charges and incur additional costs or fees in the future. This capacity is used in the Affordability Assessment. For the purposes of the 2026 Affordability Assessment, the State Water Board employed affordability thresholds for the following indicators independently and combined: Percentage of Median Household Income; Extreme Water Bill; and Household Socioeconomic Burden. Learn more about indicators and affordability thresholds in Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology.[1]

Arrearage: debt accrued by a water system's customer from failure to pay water service bill(s) which are at least 60 days or more past due.

At-Risk Public Water System: a community water system with up to 30,000 service connections and 100,000 population served or non-transient non-community water systems that serve K-12 schools that are confronting circumstances which threaten its ability to continue to meet one or more key Human Right to Water goals: (1) providing safe drinking water; (2) accessible drinking water; (3) affordable drinking water; and/or (4) maintaining a sustainable water system.

At-Risk State Small Water Systems (SSWS) and Domestic Wells (DW): State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells located in areas where groundwater may be threatened by: (1) encroaching contaminants which can lead to concentration levels that exceed safe drinking

[1] Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026affordabilityassessment-methodology.pdf

water standards; (2) water shortage risk; and/or (3) socioeconomic risk. This definition may be expanded in future assessments as more data becomes available.

Assembly Bill 2454: a legislative bill signed into law in 2024. The bill requires an owner of a domestic well that serves rental property in designated areas to participate in water testing.

Assembly Bill 2962: a legislative bill signed into law in 2024. The bill requires the City and County of San Francisco to implement capital improvement projects to restore and enhance the Bay Area regional water system. It also extends the act's repeal date to January 1, 2036.

Assembly Bill 157: a legislative bill signed into law in 2024. The bill requires 5 percent of annual proceeds from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) to be transferred to the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund. This allocation supports California's ongoing efforts to ensure access to clean and affordable drinking water.

Assembly Bill 1207: a legislative bill signed into law in 2025. The bill extends California's cap-and-invest greenhouse gas emissions program through January 1, 2046, requiring regulated entities to obtain emissions allowances under declining limits. It also updates program rules, including offset limits and use of revenues for climate and affordability initiatives, and works alongside Senate Bill 840 to guide how program funds are allocated.

Assembly Bill 1096: a legislative bill signed into law in 2025. The bill requires community water systems to collect and report additional information when schools or childcare facilities decline lead testing, including reasons for opting out. It also mandates public access to this data through a state website and requires water systems to include information about lead testing availability in annual consumer confidence reports.

Assembly Bill 1004: a legislative bill signed into law in 2025 that exempts from public disclosure any records containing financial information provided by an Indian tribe to a state or local agency as a condition of receiving financial assistance, requiring that such information remain confidential and not subject to disclosure under the California Public Records Act.

Assembly Bill 2877: A legislative bill signed into law in 2022, the bill creates and modifies provisions related to the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, including allowing funding and assistance for drinking water projects that support eligible recipients such as public agencies, nonprofits, and federally recognized California Native American tribes, to improve access to safe and affordable drinking water.

CalEnviroScreen[2]: a mapping tool produced and maintained by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) that uses environmental, health, and socioeconomic information to identify California communities that are most affected by many sources of pollution, and where people are often especially vulnerable to pollution's effects.

California Native American Tribe: socially-divided communities of California indigenous peoples recognized federally and non-federally and on the contact list maintained by the Native American Heritage Commission for the purposes of Chapter 905 of the Statutes of

[2] OEHHA CalEnviroScreen: https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen

2004. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116766, subd. (c)(1).) Typically, drinking water systems for federally recognized tribes fall under the regulatory jurisdiction of the United States Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), while public water systems operated by non-federally recognized tribes currently fall under the jurisdiction of the State Water Board.

Centralized Treatment: treating water at a central place before conveying it through a dedicated distribution system to customers.

Community Water System: a public water system that serves at least 15 service connections used by yearlong residents or regularly serves at least 25 yearlong residents of the area served by the system. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (i).)

Consistently Fail: a failure to provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116681, subd. (c).)

Consolidation: the joining of two or more public water systems, state small water systems, or affected residences into a single public water system, either physically or managerially. For the purposes of this report, consolidations may include voluntary or mandatory consolidations. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116681, subd. (e).)

Contaminants of Emerging Concern: encompass any physical, chemical, biological, or radiological substance or matter in any environmental media that may pose a risk to human and/or ecological health, for which there is not currently enforceable California or federal environmental or health standards, or the existing standard is evolving or being re-evaluated, and/or the presence, frequency of occurrence, source, fate and transport, and/or toxicology of which is not well understood, routinely monitored, and/or may lack analytical methods. For purposes of the Risk Assessment on public water systems, three chemicals are incorporated: hexavalent chromium, 1,4-dioxane, and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS).[3]

Contaminant: any physical, chemical, biological, or radiological substance or matter in water. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (a).)

Cost Assessment: the estimation of funding needed for the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund for the next fiscal year based on the amount available in the fund, anticipated funding needs, and other existing State Water Board funding sources. Thus, iterations of the Cost Assessment estimates anticipated expenditures related to the implementation of interim and/or emergency measures and longer-term solutions for Failing and At-Risk public water systems, State Small Water Systems, and Domestic Wells. Some iterations of the Cost Assessment also include the identification of available funding sources and the funding and financing gaps that may exist to support interim and long-term solutions. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116769.)

[3] These three chemicals or chemical groups are currently tracked under the Contaminants of Emerging Concern (CEC) risk indicator. Once their Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs) – the legal limits for how much of a contaminant is allowed in drinking water – take effect, they will be tracked using MCL-based indicators, such as Percentage of Sources Exceeding an MCL and Increasing Presence of Water Quality Trends Toward MCL.

Disadvantaged Community (DAC): the entire service area of a community water system, or a community therein, in which the median household income is less than 80% of the statewide annual median household income level. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (aa).)

Domestic Well: a groundwater well used to supply water for the domestic needs of an individual residence or a water system that is not a public water system and has no more than four service connections. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116681, subd. (g).)

Drinking Water Needs Assessment (**Needs Assessment):** the annual State Water Board report that provides a comprehensive identification of California drinking water challenges in achieving the Human Right to Water. The report analyzes and identifies drinking water infrastructure, managerial capacity, technical, and financial needs for communities served by public water systems, state small water systems, and domestic wells. The Needs Assessment consists of four core components: 1) Failing Water System List; 2) Risk Assessment; 3) Cost Assessment; and 4) Affordability Assessment. The Needs Assessment informs the annual Fund Expenditure Plan for the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund and broader SAFER program activities. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116769.)

Drinking Water State Revolving Loan Fund (DWSRF): a funding program managed by the State Water Board that finances infrastructure improvements to mitigate drinking water risks and support the Human Right to Water. In accordance with federal rules, the DWSRF program generally prioritizes financing for projects that (1) address the most serious human health risks, (2) are necessary to comply with federal Safe Drinking Water Act requirements and (3) assist public water systems most in need on a per household basis.

Electronic Annual Report (eAR): the Water Board's annual survey of California's public water systems which collects critical information to assess their compliance with regulatory requirements, updates contact and inventory information (such as population and number of service connections), and captures information used to assess capacities, financial and otherwise, of water systems.

Failing: the inability of a community water system or a non-community water system serving schools and daycares to provide an adequate and reliable supply of drinking water which is at all times pure, wholesome, and potable. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116555.)

Failing List: the catalogue of public water systems that are out of compliance or consistently fail to meet drinking water standards. Systems that are assessed for meeting the Failing list criteria include community water systems and non-community water systems that serve K-12 schools and daycares.[4]

Fund Expenditure Plan (**FEP):** based on the Drinking Water Needs Assessment and adopted annually by the State Water Board, describes how money from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund will be prioritized, documents past and planned expenditures, prioritizes projects for funding, and includes elements pursuant to Article 4 of Chapter 4.6 of the Health and Safety Code for the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund,

[4] Failing Water System Criteria
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/hr2w/docs/hr2w_expanded_criteria.pdf

established pursuant to Health and Safety Code section 116766.

Human Consumption: the use of water for drinking, bathing or showering, hand washing, oral hygiene, or cooking, including, but not limited to, preparing food and washing dishes. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (e).)

Human Right to Water (HR2W): the recognition that "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking and sanitary purposes," as defined in Assembly Bill 685 (AB 685). (California Water Code § 106.3, subd. (a).)

Intended Use Plan (IUP): The Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) program finances infrastructure improvements to mitigate drinking water risks and support the human right to water. This Intended Use Plan (IUP) describes the State Water Board plan for implementing the DWSRF and its complementary financing programs within a fiscal year.

Intertie: an interconnection allowing the passage of water between two or more water systems.

Interim Replacement Water or **Interim Solution:** includes, but is not limited to, bottled water, vended water, and point-of-use or point-of-entry treatment units. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116767, subd. (q).)

Large Community Water Systems: a community water system that serves more than 30,000 service connections or a population greater than 100,000.

Loan: any repayable financing instrument, including a loan, bond, installment sale agreement, note, or other evidence of indebtedness.

Local Cost Share: a proportion of the total interim and/or long-term project costs (capital, O&M, and financing costs) that are not eligible for a State grant and would therefore be borne by water systems, their ratepayers, and/or domestic well-owners. Some local cost share needs may be eligible for public or private financing (*i.e.,* a loan). Some local costs share needs may not be eligible for financing and are typically funded through available reserves or cash on hand.

Local Primacy Agency (LPA): the local health officer within a county to whom the State Water Board has delegated primary responsibility for the administration and enforcement of California Safe Drinking Water Act. An LPA is authorized by means of a local primacy delegation agreement if the local health officer demonstrates the capability to meet the local primacy program requirements established by the State Water Board pursuant to subdivision (h) of Health and Safety Code section 116375. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116330, subd. (a).)

Mandatory Consolidation: State Water Board mandated consolidation requiring two or more water systems to merge with, or receive an extension of service from another, public water system.

Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL): the highest permissible amount of a contaminant statutorily allowed in water. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (f).)

Median Household Income (MHI): the financial level that represents the middle value of revenue for an entire community, where half of the households earn more and half earn less, based on the total income received per each home and its occupants. The methods utilized for calculating MHI are included in Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology.[5] MHIs in this Needs Assessment are estimated values for the purposes of this statewide assessment.

Medium Community Water System: a community water system that serves between 3,301 and 30,000 service connections and a population up to 100,000.

Non-Community Water System: a public water system that is not a community water system. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (j).)

Non-Transient, Non-Community Water System: a public water system that is not a community water system and regularly serves at least 25 of the same persons for six months or more during a given year, such as a school. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (k).)

Point of Use (**POU):** a treatment device located where the end user accesses drinking water.

Point of Entry (POE): a treatment device located at the inlet to an entire building or facility.

Primary Drinking Water Standard: a set of established protocols for water intended for human consumption: (1) Maximum levels of contaminants that, in the judgment of the State Water Board, beyond which may have an adverse effect on the health of persons, (2) Specific treatment techniques adopted by the state board in lieu of maximum contaminant levels pursuant to Health & Saf. Code, section 116365, subd. (j), and (3) Monitoring and reporting requirements as specified in regulations adopted by the state board that pertain to maximum contaminant levels. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (c).)

Public Water System: a system for the provision of water for human consumption through pipes or other constructed conveyances that has15 or more service connections or regularly serves an average of at least 25 individuals daily at least 60 days out of the year. A public water system includes any collection, pre-treatment, treatment, storage, and distribution facilities under control of the operator of the system that are used primarily in connection with the system; any collection or pretreatment storage facilities not under the control of the operator that are used primarily in connection with the system; and any water system that treats water on behalf of one or more public water systems for the purpose of rendering it safe for human consumption. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (h).)

[5] Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026mhi-calculation.pdf

Resident: a person who physically occupies, whether by ownership, rental, lease, or other means, the same dwelling for at least 60 days of the year. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (t).)

Risk Assessment: This evaluation identifies water systems that may be at risk of failing to provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water. For public water systems, this evaluation focuses on small and medium community water systems as well as non-transient, non-community K–12 schools. It also evaluates Domestic Wells or State Small Water Systems in areas of high risk for groundwater contamination; water shortage; and/or socioeconomic risk. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116769.)

Risk Indicator: the quantifiable measurements of key data points that allow the State Water Board to assess the potential for a community water system or a non-transient, non-community water system that serves a K-12 school to fail to sustainably provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water due to water quality, water accessibility, affordability, institutional, and/or Technical, Managerial, Financial (TMF) capacity issues.

Risk Threshold: the levels, points, or values associated with an individual indicator that delineates when a water system is threatening failure, typically based on regulatory requirements or industry standards.

Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (**SADWF):** the fund created through the passage of Senate Bill 200 (SB 200) to help provide an adequate and affordable supply of drinking water for both the near and long term. SB 200 directs the annual transfer of five percent of the annual proceeds of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund (GGRF) (up to $130 million) into the fund until June 30, 2030. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116766.)

Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Program (**SAFER Program):** a set of State Water Board tools, funding sources, and regulatory authorities designed to ensure safe, accessible, and affordable drinking water for all Californians.

Safe Drinking Water: water that meets all primary and secondary drinking water standards, as defined in Health and Safety Code section 116275.

SAFER Clearinghouse: a database system, developed and maintained by the State Water Board to assist with the implementation, management, and tracking of the SAFER Program.

SAFER Status: a categorization of community water systems (CWS) and non-community water systems serving schools and daycares, determined by the Needs Assessment's Failing system criteria and Risk Assessment. The following SAFER four Statuses are used by the State Water Board. The Failing status takes precedence over Risk Assessment results. Should a Failing system's conditions improve to the point where it no longer meets the Failing criteria, its SAFER Status will revert to its Risk Assessment result. Water systems that do not meet the definition of a CWS or non-community schools/daycares are not assigned a SAFER Status.

- ***Failing***: Water systems that meet the current *Failing* criteria as defined by the State Water Board.[6]
- ***At-Risk***: Water systems At-Risk of failing. The system's risk scores are among the highest within the Risk Assessment results.
- ***Other***: CWS and non-community schools/daycares that are not Failing or At-Risk.
- ***Not-Assessed***: non-community water systems that are not serving schools or daycares.

Sanitary Survey: a comprehensive inspection to evaluate a water system's ability to provide safe drinking water to their customers and comply with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA).

Score: a standardized numerical value scaled between 0 and 1, that quantifies risk across risk indicators. Scores enable the evaluation and comparison of risk indicators.

Secondary Drinking Water Standards: these standards specify Maximum Contaminant Levels necessary to protect the public welfare. Secondary drinking water standards may apply to any contaminant in drinking water that may adversely affect its odor or appearance, potentially causing a significant number of consumers to discontinue its use, or that may otherwise negatively impact public welfare. Regulations establishing secondary drinking water standards may vary according to geographic and other circumstances and may apply to any contaminant in drinking water that adversely affects the taste, odor, or appearance of the water when the standards are necessary to ensure a supply of pure, wholesome, potable water. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (d).)

Service Connection: the point of water access between the customer's piping or constructed conveyance, and the system's meter, service pipe, or constructed conveyance, with certain exceptions set out in the definition in the Health and Safety Code. (See Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (s).)

Senate Bill No. 200: the legislative bill signed into law in 2019 that established the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Program that enabled the State Water Board to advance the goals of the Human Right to Water. (Senate Bill No. 200, CHAPTER 120)

Senate Bill No. 552: a legislative bill signed into law in 2021 that requires small water suppliers and non-transient non-community water systems, to apply draught resiliency measures subject to funding availability. (Senate Bill No. 552, CHAPTER 245)

Senate Bill No. 1188: a legislative bill signed into law in 2024. The bill requires the State Water Board to develop and enforce minimum standards for the technical, managerial, and financial capacity of small community water systems serving under 10,000 connections and non-transient non-community water systems serving schools.

[6] Failing criteria is summarized in the Drinking Water Needs Assessment and detailed online at Appendix: Failing Water System Criteria: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/hr2w/docs/hr2w_expanded_criteria.pdf.

Senate Bill No. 1147: a legislative bill signed into law in 2024. The bill mandates the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) to study the health effects of microplastics in drinking and bottled water.

Senate Bill No. 867: a legislative bill signed into law in 2024. The bill authorizes $10 billion in bonds to fund projects for water safety, climate resilience, wildfire prevention, biodiversity, sustainable agriculture, park creation, and clean air initiatives.

Senate Bill 466: a legislative bill signed into law in 2025. The bill provides temporary civil liability protections for public water systems regarding compliance with the hexavalent chromium drinking water standard. It ensures that systems meeting the total chromium standard are not deemed in violation while implementing or awaiting approval of a State Water Board compliance plan, while preserving the State Water Board's enforcement authority.

Senate Bill 131: a legislative bill signed into law in 2025 that updates the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) by expanding and extending exemptions for certain projects. It extends, through January 1, 2032, an existing exemption for projects that benefit small, disadvantaged community water systems or state small water systems.

Senate Bill 840: a legislative bill signed into law in 2025. The bill establishes how revenues from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund are prioritized and allocated beginning in fiscal year 2026–27, directing funds to various state programs in a set order. It includes annual transfers of a portion of proceeds to support the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, up to a specified cap.

Severely Disadvantaged Community (**SDAC):** the categorization of an entire water system with a service area in which the median household income is less than 60% of the statewide MHI. (See Water Code § 13476, subd. (j).)

Significant Deficiencies: State Water Board staff or LPA staff observed shortcomings identified during a Sanitary Survey or other water system inspections. Significant Deficiencies include but are not limited to defects in design, operation, or maintenance; failure or malfunction of the sources, treatment, storage; or use of a distribution system that U.S. EPA determines to be causing or has the potential to cause the introduction of contamination into the water delivered to consumers.

Small Community Water System: a community water system that serves no more than 3,300 service connections.

Small Disadvantaged Community (Small DAC or **SDAC):** category for entire service area, or the community therein, with a community water system that serves no more than 3,300 service connections or a year-round population of no more than 10,000, and in which the median household income is less than 80% of the statewide annual MHI.

Source Capacity: the total amount of water supply available, expressed as a flow, from all active sources permitted for use by a water system, including approved surface water, groundwater, and purchased water. (Title 22 of the California Code of Regulations, § 64551.40.)

State Small Water System (SSWS): a system for the provision of piped water to the public for human consumption that serves at least five, but not more than 14, service connections and does not regularly serve drinking water to more than an average of 25 individuals daily for more than 60 days out of the year. (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (n).)

State Water Board: the California State Water Resources Control Board.

Technical Assistance: direct support, provided by third parties contracted with the State Water Board, to communities to identify challenges, develop plans, build capacity, and develop application materials to access water infrastructure funding. In many cases technical assistance does not eliminate the need for other capital improvements, but it should increase the technical, managerial, and financial capacity of water systems.

Technical, Managerial, and Financial Capacity (TMF Capacity): the ability of a water system's administrators to plan for, achieve, and maintain long term compliance with drinking water standards, thereby ensuring the quality and adequacy of the water supply. This includes adequate resources for fiscal planning and management of the water system.

Transient, Non-Community Water System: A public water system that does not meet the definition of a community water system or non-transient, non-community water system, which serves 25 or more people at least 60 days out of a year or there are 15 or more service connections that are not used by yearlong residents (*e.g.*, restaurants, gas stations, parks, *etc.*).

Waterworks Standards: regulations adopted by the State Water Board entitled California Waterworks Standards (Chapter 16 (commencing with § 64551) of Division 4 of Title 22 of the California Code of Regulations). (Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (q).)

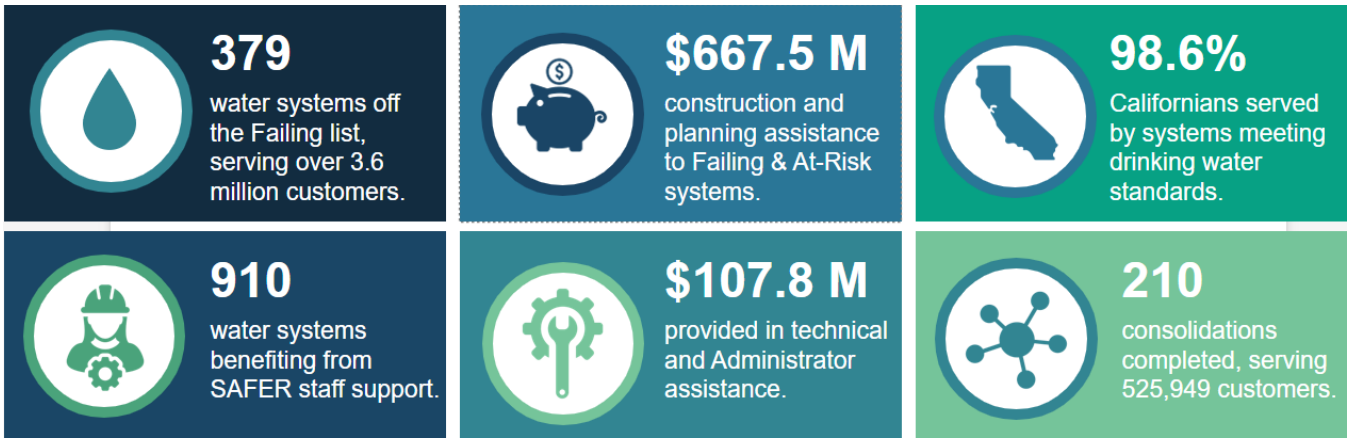
Weight: numerical significance established by the application of a multiplying value to each risk indicator or category within the Risk Assessment. It allows for the accentuation of significance of certain risk indicators and categories deemed more critical than others.

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[7] to inform the prioritization of available state funding in the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (SADWF) Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP) (Figure 2).[8]

[7] SAFER Advisory Group: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory_group.html
[8] Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund
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 Californians served by public water systems receive water that meets 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.

SAFER PROGRAM 2019–2025 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER)[9] program is a set of tools, funding resources, and regulatory authorities coordinated to assist California communities as they work to develop local capacity to ensure reliable access to safe drinking water. Informed by the Drinking Water Needs Assessment, State Water Board staff and partner organizations proactively identify and reach out to water systems that are on the Failing list or At-Risk list to inform them of available resources, support them through the financial assistance application process, and collaboratively develop interim and long-term 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 of the Failing list and 210 consolidations, benefiting approximately 525,949 people, have been completed.

The following provides a high-level summary of the tools and resources employed by the SAFER program and the systems that were prioritized for State Water Board engagement and support.

ENHANCING WATER SYSTEM CAPACITY

The goal of the SAFER program is to help Failing and At-Risk systems address their drinking water problems by building their operators' technical, financial, and managerial capacity. The program accomplishes this through funding support and regulatory authorities, including consolidations, Administrator appointments, technical assistance, and the facilitation of community involvement to advance sustainable solutions. Ultimately, the SAFER program enables systems to operate independently and sustainably so they can secure the Human Right to Water for the communities they serve, in partnership with those communities. The

[9] SAFER Program: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/

State Water Board's Division of Drinking Water (DDW),[10] which administers the SAFER program together with the Division of Financial Assistance (DFA),[11] utilizes a broad and diverse set of programs and tools to help support water system capacity. The following sections summarize how these tools are leveraged to support California water systems.

SANITARY SURVEYS

A sanitary survey is a comprehensive review and inspection to evaluate the adequacy of a water system to provide safe drinking water. The comprehensive evaluation and inspection must include: 1) sources of supply; 2) treatment facilities; 3) distribution system; 4) finished water storage; 5) pumps, pump facilities, and controls; 6) monitoring, reporting, and data verification; 7) system management and operation; and 8) operator compliance with State requirements. The sanitary survey includes an in-office file review and a physical field visit inspection.

U.S. EPA requires that sanitary surveys be conducted at least every three years for community water systems and every five years for non-community water systems. Typically, DDW staff perform these sanitary surveys. However, in 25 counties, this authority is delegated to Local Primacy Agencies (LPAs) to survey public water systems with less than 200 service connections. The State Board tracks sanitary survey completion rates annually as shown in Table 1 and Table 2.

During sanitary surveys, DDW and LPA staff visit public water systems to evaluate their compliance with the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) and ensure responsible staff are proficient in sampling and complying with other California regulations and requirements. The sanitary survey is also an opportunity to identify shortcomings, such as technical assistance needs, capacity development needs, or significant deficiencies. Significant deficiencies are substantial defects that are causing or have the potential to cause the introduction of contamination into water delivered to customers. Sanitary survey results enable DDW and LPA staff to initiate technical assistance or other capacity development.

[10] Division of Drinking Water I State Water Board
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/programs/
[11] Division of Financial Assistance I State Water Board
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/

Table 1: Community Water System Sanitary Survey[12]

Regulating Agency	# of Systems	2025 Inspections	Sig. Def. Identified in 2025	# of Inspections 2019–2025	# Sig. Def. Identified 2019–2025
State Water Board	2,168	625	18	3,978	135
LPAs	650	184	3	1,825	24
TOTAL:	**2,818**	**809**	**21**	**5,803**	**159**

Table 2: Non-Community Water System Sanitary Surveys[13]

Regulating Agency	# of Systems	2025 Inspections	Sig. Def. Identified in 2025	# of Inspections 2019–2025	# Sig. Def. Identified 2019–2025
State Water Board	2,497	351	10	2,745	75
LPAs	2,047	446	11	3,631	57
TOTAL:	**4,444**	**797**	**21**	**6,376**	**132**

SAFER ENGAGEMENT UNITS

DDW's SAFER Section includes four Engagement Units[14] located across the state.[15] SAFER Engagement Units provide direct assistance to water systems, the communities they serve, and key partners to help navigate and address drinking water challenges.

SAFER Engagement Units focus on community water systems and non-transient, non-community water systems serving schools that are on the Failing list. Many Failing water systems struggle to implement solutions on their own and the staff of the SAFER Engagement Units are experienced and trained to help navigate obstacles and assist systems in achieving the Human Right to Water goal of delivering safe, reliable, and affordable drinking water. The SAFER Engagement Units are staffed by engineers, scientists and analysts who provide guidance, analysis, and support to water systems and communities. SAFER Engagement Unit

[12] Sanitary surveys conducted between January 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025. Data was pulled in March 2026. The Monterey County LPA program was returned to DDW in mid-2025; therefore, all Monterey County sanitary survey numbers are included under the State Water Board.
[13] Sanitary surveys conducted between January 1, 2025, and December 31, 2025. Data was pulled in March 2026. The Monterey County LPA program was returned to DDW in mid-2025; therefore, all Monterey County sanitary survey numbers are included under the State Water Board.
[14] SAFER Engagement Units I State Water Board
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/engagement_unit.html
[15] The four SAFER Engagement Units are: the Water System Engagement North, Water System Engagement South, Rural Solutions, and County Engagement Unit. Currently the SAFER Section is comprised of 25 staff.

staff help manage projects, facilitate communication, overcome obstacles, and inform local decision-making.

Many of the water systems the SAFER Engagement Units work with are experiencing long-term challenges, some pre-dating the first Risk Assessment (2021) and first Failing list criteria (2017). Because these systems are combatting antiquated and Failing infrastructure, inadequate economic resources, historic disinvestment and customer affordability challenges, it can take many years to determine sustainable solutions, foster necessary agreement, and deliver new or upgraded drinking water infrastructure. Furthermore, implementing project solutions to deliver safe drinking water to these systems is extremely sophisticated and logistically challenging, while the technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) capacity within the system is often far too limited to shepherd these projects to a successful outcome. This mismatch of limited TMF capacity and complicated sustainable solutions necessitates project leadership from SAFER Engagement Unit staff to guide water systems and stakeholders to successful project outcomes. Table 3 illustrates the steps the Engagement Units often take to guide water systems through successful planning and implementation of drinking water projects.

Table 3: SAFER Engagement Unit Project Facilitation Process

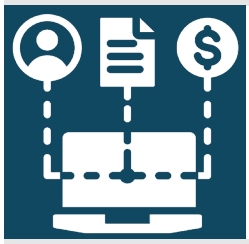
8 STEPS: WHAT SAFER ENGAGEMENT UNITS DO	
	**STEP 1: PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION** Identify and document the water system's issues through review of compliance records, sanitary surveys, and other regulatory information, resulting in formal recognition of a problem or enforcement action.
	**STEP 2: INITIAL STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT** Begin coordination with stakeholders by establishing engagement services, determining funding pathways, submitting assistance requests, and initiating compliance action plans (CAPs) where applicable.
	**STEP 3: PROJECT IDENTIFICATION** Define and evaluate potential project solutions by securing planning funds, conducting feasibility studies and necessary investigations, and developing engineering documents to identify a preferred alternative.

STEP 4: PLANNING & PRELIMINARY DESIGN

Advance the selected project by preparing and submitting technical, environmental, and financial documentation including engineering plans, CEQA compliance, and financial capacity materials.

STEP 5: SECURING FUNDING

Finalize and secure project funding by completing internal approvals, routing master funding files, and executing funding agreements or contracts.



STEP 6: PRE-CONSTRUCTION

Prepare the project for construction by completing pre-bid requirements, securing bid solicitation approvals, and advertising and awarding the construction contract. This phase culminates with a notice to proceed to construction.

STEP 7: CONSTRUCTION ACTIVITIES

Initiate and complete construction by issuing the Notice to Proceed, executing the work, and finalizing punch list items. This phase concludes with physical project completion and readiness for final inspection.

STEP 8: COMPLETION

Close out the project through final inspections, permitting, and regulatory actions, including issuing permits and achieving return to compliance (RTC) or system inactivation.

Since their establishment in 2019–2020, SAFER Engagement Units have provided support to 907 public water systems through targeted engagement activities, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Number of New and Active Engagement per Year[16]

Year	Number of New Engagements	Number of Active Engagements
2019	N/A	
2020	363	363
2021	219	582
2022	127	668
2023	78	676
2024	71	684
2025	49	696
Total	**907**	

SAFER Engagement Units utilize funding tools and build collaboration with water systems and project stakeholders. These tools include voluntary and mandatory consolidations, partnership events, third-party Administrators, Point of Use/Point of Entry household treatment[17] and SAFER funding. By engaging, training, and supporting communities and stakeholders, SAFER Engagement Units lead complex projects to success: securing access to safe and affordable drinking water. A detailed breakdown of current active engagement services is summarized in Table 5.

[16] The trend for new engagement services may decrease, but this reflects the program commitment to prioritizing SAFER efforts more effectively, focusing on those who have been on the Failing list the longest and other key factors to drive meaningful improvements.

[17] Point-of-Use (POU) and Point-of-Entry (POE) Treatment - Permanent Regulations https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/regulations/

Table 5: Currently Active Engagement Services Rendered by Type[18]

Engagement Service	Description	# of Systems
Consolidation Assistance	Provide support to water systems navigating a consolidation project. Services may include review of consolidation agreements, assisting funding acquisition and/or technical assistance, community outreach and education, liaising with the receiving water system, and review of project scope, design, and timeline.	342
Administrative Support	Work with DFA to appoint an Administrator and support that Administrator to advance long-term solutions for the water system. This support includes but is not limited to designating public water systems for administrators, holding public meetings, working with proposed administrators on their respective workplans for administrator assignments, working with DFA on funding eligibility, issuance of administrator orders, and ongoing performance review of appointed Administrators.	21
Interim Solutions	Provide support to a water system to access interim or emergency assistance. This may include support in acquisition of funding and technical assistance, community outreach and education, and technical review of proposed interim solutions	12
General Assistance	Provide expertise in navigating funding options for engineering, community engagement, funding acquisition for projects, legal assistance, water system staff training, regulatory compliance and reporting, and performing rate studies and rate setting.	99
Tracking	Some Failing and At-Risk water systems do not require assistance to identify and implement long-term solutions. Other systems have received SAFER support and are on a path towards compliance. These systems are tracked to ensure progress is being made.	277
Total		**751**

[18] Some water systems may have more than one service rendered while working with Engagement Unit staff.

Small Water System + Challenges

Seven years of SAFER program implementation has provided the State Water Board with substantial experience and insight into the struggles facing small water systems. SAFER Engagement Unit staff describe and categorize these challenges as follows:

Governance Limitations
Volunteer boards, integral to the governance of small water systems, frequently encounter limitations that impede effective operations. Many boards struggle to maintain full membership, leading to gaps in leadership and decision-making capacity. Aging staff and volunteers, without successors in sight, struggle to grasp evolving regulatory and technical demands. As a result, crucial decisions related to infrastructure upgrades, compliance issues, and emergency response can be delayed or inadequately addressed. This knowledge gap necessitates reliance on third-party expertise, adding coordination challenges and extending project timelines.

Financial Constraints
Financial constraints pose another significant hurdle for small water systems. Limited resources restrict their ability to respond to emergencies promptly or sustain day-to-day operations effectively. Inadequate water rates, billing practices, and collections exacerbate financial strains, making critical infrastructure improvements unattainable and perpetuating a cycle of deferred maintenance. This financial instability further compromises the long-term viability of these systems. Small water systems may have limited ability to hire the proper staff and technical experts to operate the water system, provide financial oversight, or design and execute construction projects. Additionally, small water systems face challenges in accessing State Water Board funding due to the complexity of funding processes, including securing financial assistance and managing the reimbursement process.

Technical and Regulatory Competency
The lack of technical expertise from small water system staff often falls short of the increasingly complex legal, regulatory, and operational demands placed on water systems today. These challenges also complicate project implementation. Securing necessary legal agreements, navigating intricate regulatory frameworks, and addressing compliance issues require significant time and resources.

Public Communication and Transparency Gaps
Public trust and perception also play a key role in project acceptance and stakeholder engagement. Public skepticism towards water system organizations, fueled by past incidents or lack of transparency, can hinder community buy-in for necessary projects and initiatives. Small water systems routinely struggle to communicate with their customers. Public meetings can be irregular and other forms of communication, such as webpages, emails and mailers may not exist. SAFER Engagement Unit staff routinely hear about small water systems' inadequate communication with their customers.

Project Challenges
Consolidation, while recognized as a preferred strategy for enhancing system sustainability, is not without challenges. Legal complexities surrounding entity mergers, divergent interests among stakeholders, governance complexities, and infrastructure and operational hurdles can

impede consolidation efforts. From the small water systems' perspective, consolidation may represent a loss of ownership, autonomy, and control. Large receiving water systems, pivotal partners in consolidation initiatives, may exhibit reluctance due to capacity constraints. They may also lack the staffing and resources needed to support a small water system consolidation project or the excess source capacity to serve the small water system. Lastly, some large water systems have expressed reluctance about being involved with the State Board's funding program. Large water systems have communicated to SAFER Engagement Unit staff the following concerns:

- The funding process can be long and complex.
- The reimbursement process may not be timely enough to pay contractors, requiring the large water system to float construction costs.
- Project components for the consolidation may not follow established local ordinances or water master plans.
- Legal requirements in the State Board's funding agreements may create an unnecessary liability and may not follow a system's normal processes for adding customers.

SAFER Engagement Unit staff work with water systems to navigate project challenges. They host regular stakeholder meetings to secure buy-in, coordinate and participate in public meetings to gain project momentum and liaise with the Division of Financial Assistance (DFA) to ensure crucial support reaches small water systems through the State Water Board's Technical Assistance program. However, the scale and complexity of these challenges underscore the ongoing need for sustained support and advocacy to safeguard community health and ensure the resilience of our water systems. Each hurdle presents a unique set of challenges that require strategic solutions and collaborative efforts to overcome. Project examples and success stories showing community challenges and how SAFER Engagement Units help address them can be viewed on the Water Partnership Success Stories webpage.[19]

Northern and Southern Engagement Units

The Northern and Southern Engagement Units primarily assist Failing water systems to consolidate with neighboring, higher-capacity systems. Navigating the landscape of small water system compliance and project implementation is a complex endeavor marked by numerous formidable challenges that underscore the critical need for strategic interventions and dedicated resources from the SAFER Engagement Units. Engagement Unit staff work closely with project stakeholders, such as potential receiving water systems, and coordinate with other board staff in the DFA or Office of Public Engagement, Equity, and Tribal Affairs (OPEETA), to help drive consolidations to completion.

[19] Water Partnership Success Stories
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/partnershipsuccess.html

Rural Solutions Unit

In 2022, the SAFER program established the Rural Solutions Unit (RSU) with the primary objective of assisting Failing water systems that are too remote to be physically consolidated with other systems. Strategies supported by the RSU for these communities include Administrator appointments, development of new or additional water sources, centralized treatment, point-of-entry (POE) treatment, point-of-use (POU) treatment, and other innovative solutions throughout the State. The RSU works with DFA, public water systems, domestic well owners, technical assistance providers, engineering firms, device manufacturers, and stakeholders to develop and implement drinking water solutions.

The RSU led the State Water Board's effort to develop a report[20] identifying and addressing the potential successes and shortcomings of POU/POE treatment equipment as interim solutions to contamination in public drinking water systems and domestic wells. Finalized and published in 2023, the report addresses equity-related, technical, social, regulatory, and financial aspects of POU/POE treatment, and provides recommendations and identifies areas for further study for successful implementation of POU/POE treatment. A technical assistance provider (Stantec Consulting) is now making progress on the following three recommended efforts listed in the 2023 report: 1) development of an educational strategy and materials; 2) performance certification for devices; and 3) operator education cohort and workforce development. Additional recommended efforts will commence in 2026.

County Engagement Unit

In 2023, the SAFER program established the County Engagement Unit (CEU) to oversee county Local Primacy Agency (LPA)[21] programs and work with counties to implement Senate Bill SB 552[22] requirements. Statewide, 24 out of 58 counties elect to operate an LPA program through which they carry out provisions of the California Safe Drinking Water Act and California Health and Safety Code. The CEU works with LPAs to ensure that the regulatory requirements delegated to them through Local Primacy Delegation Agreements are consistently met. This includes developing annual workplans, conducting annual evaluations and providing guidance, often in coordination with other branches of the DDW. The CEU also works with counties and other stakeholders to facilitate drought preparedness for domestic wells and state small water systems, as required by SB 552.

In 2025, the CEU worked closely with counties to evaluate their performance during the 2023–2024 fiscal year. The evaluations established that LPAs successfully:

- Completed 93 of 294 (32%) of their permit goals, with an additional 173 permits that were not required but were completed throughout the year.
- Completed 473 of 583 (81%) of their sanitary survey goals, with an additional 184 sanitary surveys that were not required but were completed throughout the year.

[20] 2023 State Water Board POU POE Report
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/docs/2023/2023-POU-POE-report.pdf
[21] County Engagement Unit I State Water Board
https://waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/programs/documents/ddw-lpa-not-lpa-map-exp.pdf
[22] Senate Bill No. 552, section 10609.62, Chapter 245
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220SB552

- Issued 1,070 enforcement actions.
- Brought 145 unique water systems with violations into compliance.
- Achieved an average of 92% completion rate for their required electronic Annual Report (eAR) submission.

In addition to these successes, staff identified areas for improvement for LPA programs and provided recommendations and directives for short-term changes in program implementation. Information gathered during the evaluations will guide long-term LPA program development at the State Water Board.

For developing water shortage contingency plans as required by SB 552, the CEU also supported small community water systems and non-transient non-community K-12 schools by providing templates, best practice examples, and training.[23] These were collaboratively developed with the Department of Water Resources and the California State University, Sacramento in 2022, with feedback solicited from small water systems to ensure the resources met their needs and complied with SB 552 requirements. To date, 567 of 2,647 (21%) systems required to develop a water shortage contingency plan have done so. The State Water Board has no enforcement authority associated with the water shortage contingency plans. Additional information about the templates and events can be found on the State Water Board's website.[24]

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

Technical assistance is direct support to communities provided by third parties contracted with the State Water Board. These parties identify challenges, develop plans, build capacity and develop application materials to access water infrastructure funding. In many cases technical assistance does not eliminate the need for other capital improvements, but it should increase the technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) capacity of the water systems. Technical assistance is designed to assist water systems in developing the financial and managerial structures necessary to maintain a sustainable water system, including asset management plans, water rate studies, fiscal policies, drought plans, etc. A combination of updated infrastructure and proactive long-term managerial and fiscal policies can help address affordability issues and preventatively meet the needs of these water systems before expensive emergency responses are necessary.

[23] Water Shortage Contingency Plan Templates:
Small Water Supplier Template (community water systems w/ 1,000 - 2,999 service connections)
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2023/templateblankwscp1000-2999connections.docx
Small Water Supplier Best Practice Example
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2023/smalltowncsdsamplewscp1000-2999connections.docx
Non-Transient, Non-Community School Template
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2023/templateblankwscpschools.docx
Non-Transient, Non-Community School Best Practice Example
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2023/sampletemplatewscpschools.docx

[24] Drought Planning for Small Water Suppliers and Rural Communities (SB 552)
https://water.ca.gov/Programs/Water-Use-And-Efficiency/SB-552

The State Water Board prioritizes water systems serving small, disadvantaged communities (DACs) or low-income households for technical assistance support. Technical assistance providers utilize the results for the Needs Assessment as a starting point to better assess entrenched challenges and work with the water systems to better understand their needs. Technical assistance providers often support project scoping, including development of an engineering report, cost estimate, plans and specifications, and necessary environmental documentation for the most feasible long-term solution.

In addition, the State Water Board may use a regional approach to pool services to multiple systems within an area to reduce costs.[25] In all cases, DFA staff are assigned to oversee and manage the scope, cost and progress of all technical assistance work, with increased attention given to new types of services that have been approved under the SAFER program.

The State Water Board continues to expand investments in the technical assistance program, with a focus on small, disadvantaged communities and consolidations. Legislation enacted in 2021 added qualified technical assistance providers as a new eligible funding recipient for monies from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund. The State Water Board developed a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process to identify qualified technical assistance providers, including for-profit entities. The State Water Board has qualified 21 eligible technical assistance providers. In 2025, DFA had 12 drinking water technical assistance providers actively providing assistance. The expanded list of qualified technical assistance providers enables new types and a greater volume of services to be available to communities and public water systems, as well as the expansion of services to other areas of the state (Table 6).

Table 6: Technical Assistance Providers in 2025

Technical Assistance Providers	
California Urban Water Agencies	Provost & Pritchard Consulting Group
Sanbell Engineering	Rural Community Assistance Corporation
Community Water Center	Self-Help Enterprises
GHD, Inc.	Stantec Consulting Services, Inc.
Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability	University Enterprises Inc. at California State University, Sacramento
NV5, Inc.	University of California at Davis, School of Law

From 2019 through 2025, the State Water Resources Control Board provided approximately $99.3 million in technical assistance funding to support 273[26] water systems and communities through work plan agreements with multiple technical assistance providers focused on comprehensive planning efforts, which help guide systems toward securing construction

[25] Policy for Developing the Fund Expenditure Plan https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/sustainable_water_solutions/docs/2023/final_policy_for_dev_fep_sadwf_0130.pdf

[26] The lower counts this year compared to last year are due to improved methodology. Procedures have been standardized to ensure more consistent and accurate reporting. This updated approach explains the difference from prior estimates.

funding agreements. Table 7 summarizes the number of unique water systems receiving technical assistance, organized by the year in which support was first initiated. It is important to note that some projects span multiple years to complete, and certain systems may receive multiple technical assistance assignments for different tasks or through different providers.

Table 8 summarizes the amount of funding committed by funding sources to support technical assistance via master funding agreements with qualified technical assistance providers. As of December 2025, the amount of funding remaining for multi-year technical assistance master agreements is approximately $123.2 million.

Table 7: Number of Unique Water Systems Receiving Technical Assistance by Initial Year of Engagement (2019 – 2025)[27]

SAFER Status	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Failing	54	37	55	23	28	15	25
At-Risk	37	18	38	18	20	7	8
Other	91	72	127	38	56	30	12
TOTAL:	**182**	**127**	**220**	**79**	**104**	**52**	**45**

Table 8: Technical Assistance Funding Committed to Master Agreements (2019 – 2025)[28]

Year	Drinking Water State Revolving Fund Set-Aside	Prop 1	Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund	General Fund
2025	$0	$0	$83,039,908	$0
2024	$0	- $213,260	$1,336,900	$324,775
2023	$0	-$163,995	$56,368,394	$16,885,948
2022	$0	-$364,057	$51,766,654	$2,176,087
2021	$0	- $481,187	$8,058,045	$0
2020	$0	- $11,693,393[29]	$67,171,151	$0
2019	$0	$250,000	$0	$0
TOTAL:	**$0**	**-$ 12,665,892**	**$ 267,741,052**	**$ 19,386,810**

[27] These are the number of unique SAFER systems which received technical assistance each year. A total of 809 different water systems received technical across these years combined.
[28] The dollar amount listed under the “Prop 1” column represents the funding disencumbered due to either funding swap or unused funding at the end of a funding agreement. A total amount of $24,998,396 Prop 1 funds was encumbered for technical assistance from July 1, 2016 to December 31, 2019.
[29] In 2020, Prop 1 funds on five technical assistance agreements were swapped for Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund funding.

WATER SYSTEM PARTNERSHIPS & CONSOLIDATIONS

Small water systems are often less resilient to natural disasters like drought and wildfire, have more difficulty adjusting to regulatory changes, and struggle to fund infrastructure maintenance and replacement. Water system partnerships and consolidations are proven strategies that have successfully benefited many small communities.[30] Water system partnerships strengthen the collective ability of all stakeholders to ensure safe and sustainable drinking water. These partnerships can be either informal, such as resource sharing, or formal, such as contracting between water systems. Consolidation, or the combining of two or more water systems, can be either physical or managerial, and leverage economies of scale that can result in cost savings from resource sharing.

Physical consolidation is the joining of two or more water systems, which commonly includes a smaller system being subsumed into a larger water system. When a physical consolidation occurs, one water system is dissolved, and its customers are provided service by the receiving water system. If the project can be expanded to include multiple water systems in the area, the State Water Board may support a regionalization project that benefits a broader customer base. Managerial consolidation occurs when a small water system becomes part of a larger water system for all managerial purposes but continues to use its original water supply and distribution system. More organization and connectivity in the water system landscape creates a more sustainable and resilient water supply. Some hypothetical examples include:

- **Managerial Consolidation**: “Water System A” is a mutual water system with an aging, all-volunteer staff. The staff no longer want to be responsible for the water system and there are no community members willing to take over. The water system is too far from the nearest large water system to make it cost-effective to physically consolidate, but the larger water system is willing to assume legal responsibility for the system and take over regulatory reporting, billing, operations, *etc*. The smaller water system dissolves and is no longer legally responsible for water service.

- **Physical consolidation**: “Water System B” is a senior mobile home park with its own water system and the owner decides it no longer wishes to be responsible for providing drinking water. The nearest city can provide water to the mobile home park through a physical pipe interconnection. By connecting with the nearest city’s water system, the mobile home park will dissolve its water system and no longer be responsible for providing water. In this case, the city’s water system is considered the "receiving" water system and the mobile home park the "subsumed" water system.

- **Regionalization**: The neighbors of “Water System C” include other mobile home parks, some neighborhoods with their own small water systems, and a K-12 school with an unreliable well. Community organizations and local elected officials work with the State Water Board to develop a regionalization project that will leverage economies of scale to create a regional sustainable drinking water solution.

[30] Water Partnerships Overview I State Water Board
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/waterpartnership.html

SAFER program funds help small water systems pay for consolidations and may incentivize the larger water systems to assume additional responsibility where feasible. Consolidations typically require community engagement, water system governance changes, complex engineering, and multiple agreements between numerous parties. DDW's SAFER Engagement Unit staff and engineers assist with initiating partnership discussions, outreach to other agencies and stakeholders, and facilitate possible consolidation alternatives. Consolidation success stories and project examples illustrating community challenges, and how SAFER Engagement Units help address them, can be viewed on the Water Partnership Success Stories.[31]

Detailed information, including the total number of new engagements initiated per year, counts of physical consolidations per SAFER status, current active engagements; and mandatory consolidations, are summarized in Table 9 and Table 10 below.

Table 9: Completed Consolidations by Year and SAFER Status[32]

SAFER Status	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	TOTAL
Failing	8	5	2	5	6	6	8	40
At-Risk	0	0	2	3	2	4	2	13
Other	32	19	24	23	16	20	17	151
TOTAL:	**40**	**24**	**28**	**31**	**24**	**30**	**27**	**204**

Table 10: Mandatory Consolidations in Process

Joining System	Receiving System	Population	Service Connection	County
East Orosi Community Services District	Orosi Public Utility District	423	103	Tulare
Old River Mutual Water Company	City of Bakersfield	130	19	Kern
South Kern Mutual Water Company	City of Bakersfield	32	13	Kern
Riverdale Estates	Indio Water Authority	300	186	Riverside
West Water Company	Sonoma County CSA 41-Fitch	40	13	SONOMA
	Total:	**925**		

[31] Water Partnership Success Stories
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/partnershipsuccess.html

[32] The annual consolidation numbers, as well as the cumulative totals across years, may slightly differ from those reported in the 2025 Needs Assessment Report due to data cleaning processes implemented to improve overall accuracy.

ADMINISTRATORS

A water system Administrator is a qualified specialist that provides technical, managerial, and/or financial expertise to struggling water systems. Disadvantaged communities served by a Failing water system are eligible for an Administrator funded through the SAFER program. The Administrator Policy Handbook[33] (Policy) provides directions regarding the appointment of Administrators by the State Water Board. The Policy was updated in January 2025 to include provisions for appointing Administrators for designated sewer systems pursuant to AB 805.[34]

Administrators may be individual persons, businesses, non-profit organizations, local agencies like counties or nearby larger utilities, and other entities. Administrators act on behalf of a designated water system as a general manager or may be assigned limited specific duties, such as supervising an infrastructure improvement project. Administrators are often appointed for a limited term to help a water system through the consolidation process or to come into compliance.

The appointment of an Administrator is an authority given to the State Water Board to act when a water system, based on the Needs Assessment and the direct knowledge and expertise of DDW/LPA staff, is identified as in need but does not have the resources itself to secure one. The State Water Board does recognize the significant and, in some cases, the potentially disruptive effect of ordering acceptance of an Administrator and therefore uses this authority prudently; only doing so after careful consideration and seeking and incorporating significant community engagement, as stipulated in the Policy.

At present, qualified Administrators include:

- Counties (*e.g.*, Sonoma and Tulare)
- For-profit water systems (*e.g.*, Russian River Utility), and
- Engineering services providers (*e.g.*, Provost and Prichard, Stantec Consulting, SRT Consultants)

Since obtaining a list of qualified Administrators in 2020, the State Water Board has allocated funding for 17 public water systems[35] in need of an Administrator and held public meetings for the impacted communities, representing approximately 4,846 people and 1,501 service connections in seven counties. In addition, the Richgrove Community Services District has an Administrator appointment currently in the development phase and is awaiting execution of a funding agreement to proceed [36]. Currently, there are 15 active Administrator projects with appointments and funding approved by the State Water Board (Table 11) and two projects completed (Table 12).

[33] Administrator Policy Handbook
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2025/administrator-policy-handbook.pdf
[34] Assembly Bill No, 805
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202320240AB805
[35] Ten systems were initiated in 2020, three in 2021, one in 2022, one in 2023, and two in 2024.
[36] Water System Administrators
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/administrator.html

Table 11: Administrator Projects – Currently Active[37]

System Name	Population	County	Funding Approved by State Water Board	Administrator Appointed	Year Appointed
East Orosi CSD	423	Tulare	$994,544	County of Tulare	2022
Six Acres Water Company	66	Sonoma	$728,288	SRT Consultants	2024
Keeler CSD	66	Inyo	$1,221,173	Provost and Pritchard	2023
Cazadero Water Company	250	Sonoma	$512,765	Russian River Utility	2023
Teviston CSD	370	Tulare	$1,794,595	Stantec Consulting	2023
NorCal Water Works	45	Tehama	$1,166,558	Provost and Pritchard	2023
Sierra Vista Water Association	44	Tulare	$1,166,558	Provost and Pritchard	2023
South Kern Mutual Water Company	22	Kern	$688,882	Provost and Pritchard	2024
Old River Mutual Water Company	126	Kern	$688,882	Provost and Pritchard	2024
West Water Company	40	Sonoma	$184,670	County of Sonoma	2024
Las Deltas Mutual Water Company	375	Fresno	$773,937	Provost and Pritchard	2024
Lake Morena Views Mutual Water Company	360	San Diego	$1,060,009	Stantec Consulting	2024
Allensworth CSD	521	Tulare	$965,787	Stantec Consulting	2024
Daggett CSD	795	San Bernadino	$573,540	Provost and Pritchard	2025
Valley Ford Water Association	88	Sonoma	$394,761	Russian River Utility	2025

[37] Through December 31, 2025.

System Name	Population	County	Funding Approved by State Water Board	Administrator Appointed	Year Appointed
TOTAL:	**3,591**		**$12,914,949**		

Table 12: Administrator Projects - Completed

System Name	Population	County	State Water Board Funding	Administrator Identified	Year Appointed	Year Completed
North Edwards Water District	944	Kern	$309,457	California Rural Water Association	2020	2023
Six Acres Water Company	66	Sonoma	$214,472	Demery and Associates[38]	2022	2024
TOTAL:	**1,010**		**$523,929**			

The State Water Board is currently working with Administrators that are likely to have multiple Administrator projects spanning multiple years. This has led to the development of Administrator master agreements to simplify the process and expedite future Administrator appointments for multiple water systems.

In 2022, the State Water Board developed Administrator master agreements with Provost & Pritchard Consulting Group and Stantec. In 2023, a third Administrator master agreement was developed with SRT Consultants. No additional Administrator master agreements are in development. As of January 2026, the amount remaining in these multi-year Administrator master agreements is $19.9 million, which can go towards assisting approximately 13 to 20 future systems that are designated for Administrator appointments over the next three years. The State Water Board continues to accept Statements of Qualifications from potential Administrators. More information about the Administrator program is found on the State Water Board's Administrator web page.[39]

PLANNING & CONSTRUCTION FUNDING ASSISTANCE

In 2025, long-term solutions, such as drinking water infrastructure construction and consolidation, were provided to 51 water systems serving approximately 3.3 million individuals. Planning assistance (towards construction of long-term solutions) was provided to 33 water

[38] Demery and Associates requested to step away from the administrator appointment for Six Acres Water Company, SRT Consultants was appointed as the replacement administrator in 2024.
[39] State Water Board Administrators – Information for Potential Administrators https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/future-administrator.html

systems serving approximately 0.3 million individuals.[40] Since 2019, the percentage of Failing and At-Risk systems receiving assistance from the State Water Board and the amount of funding received each fiscal year has increased year to year, with a majority of funding going towards capital projects. Table 13 summarizes the amount of funding provided for planning and construction projects from 2019 through 2025. Table 14 and Table 15 summarize which funding programs supported these projects.

Table 13: Planning and Construction Funding (2019 – 2025)

Funding Provided	# of Systems	# of Projects	Planning Funding	Construction Funding
2025	84	44	$7.5 M	$345 M
2024	98	88	$17.4 M	$752 M
2023	82	64	$5.8 M	$448.2 M
2022	55	48	$6.2 M	$749.0 M
2021	73	60	$8.3 M	$511.4 M
2020	55	40	$5.2 M	$209.5 M
2019	37	33	$7.0 M	$188.0 M
TOTAL:	**484**	**377**	**$57.4 M**	**$3,203 M**

Table 14: Planning Funding by Funding Program (2019 – 2025)

Funding Provided	Drinking Water State Revolving Fund	Drinking Water Bonds	General Fund	Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund
2025	$7 M	$0 M	$0.5 M	$0 M
2024	$16 M	$0 M	$1.4 M	$0 M
2023	$4.3 M	$0.4 M	$0.8 M	$0.3 M
2022	$2.0 M	$2.1 M	$2.1 M	$0
2021	$2.0 M	$6.2 M	$0	$0.1 M
2020	$1.2 M	$2.8 M	$0	$1.2 M
2019	$6.6 M	$0.7 M	$0	$0
TOTAL:	**$39.1 M**	**$12.2 M**	**$4.8 M**	**$1.6 M**

[40] Additional planning resources are available via the technical assistance program.

Table 15: Construction Funding by Funding Program (2019 – 2025)

Funding Provided	Drinking Water State Revolving Fund	Drinking Water Bonds	General Fund	Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund
2025	$300.1 M	$3.3 M	$10.8 M	$30.8 M
2024	$525 M	$47.9 M	$156 M	$22.7 M
2023	$222.0 M	$11.2 M	$192.5 M	$22.5 M
2022	$689.0 M	$13.1 M	$42.5 M	$7.2 M
2021	$394.3 M	$83.2 M	$4.8 M	$29.4 M
2020	$131.1 M	$22.5 M	$4.4 M	$45.8 M
2019	$166.1 M	$21.8 M	$0	$0
TOTAL:	**$2,427.6 M**	**$2037**	**$410.8 M**	**$158.4 M**

The State Water Board continues to work on several funding process improvements that are currently being implemented. These are described further in the FY 2025-26 Safe and Affordable Drinking Water FEP[41], which was adopted by the Board November 4, 2025. The FEP continues to include data on racial and other demographics for projects funded by the SADWF, and staff will continue to further evaluate racial equity in the program.

INTERIM OR EMERGENCY FUNDING ASSISTANCE

Interim water solutions are prioritized for Failing public water systems, state small water systems and domestic wells that demonstrate a need for interim drinking water assistance, with priority given to systems and households located in disadvantaged communities (DAC's) or serving low-income households. Prioritization applies when water quality or quantity creates a need for interim drinking water assistance. Interim solutions include POU/POE systems, hauled water, bottled water, vending machines/filling stations, or temporary connections to safe water sources.

Interim solutions are also available to support state small water systems and domestic wells via the development of regional bottled water, well testing, and/or POU/POE programs with counties (or other local partners) with the highest numbers of state small water systems and/or domestic wells either in high-risk aquifers or high-risk of water shortage. These programs can include interim measures to address both drought and contamination, as well as longer-term solutions such as consolidations, public water system connections, or well repair/replacement.

Funding may be provided for these types of solutions by either system-specific agreements or regional (including county-wide) programs with third parties that can administer funding to eligible systems or households served by state small water systems or domestic wells. Table

[41] Fiscal Year 2025-26 Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP)
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/docs/2025/fy2025-26-fep-final-1125.pdf

16 summarizes system-specific interim solution and emergency funding from 2019-2025 by funding program and lists the estimated number of people that benefited from this assistance, Table 17 summarizes the regional programs approved for interim solutions and emergency funding support.

Table 16: System-specific Interim Solutions & Emergency Funding by Funding Program (2019 – 2025)

Fiscal Year	SAFER Program Funding	Total Population Assisted	No. of Systems Assisted
2024-25	$3.9 M	17,363	11
2023-24	$4.7 M	21,350	12
2022-23	$5 M	24,614	19
2021-22	$1.64 M	19,964	21
2020-21	$707,218	358	5
2019-20	$1.27 M	5,348	9
TOTAL:	**$17.22 M**	**88,997**	**77**

Table 17: Regional Programs for Interim Solutions & Emergency Funding Approved (2019 – 2025)[42, 43]

Recipient and Program	County or Region Covered	Funding Approved by State Water Board	Funding Remaining	Active Enrollees
Self-Help Enterprises Bottled Water	San Joaquin Valley	$9,707,680	$598,179.03	3,092
Self-Help Enterprises Point of Use/Point of Entry	San Joaquin Valley	$7,698,375	$3,166,351.00	425
Self-Help Enterprises Tanks and Hauled Water	San Joaquin Valley	$115,376,502	$15,933,388	811

[42] Information presented on the amount of funding remaining and active enrollees for the programs is as of January 2025. These programs include enrollees served by private wells, state smalls, and eligible public water systems. Total enrollment over the life of the programs is higher. An active enrollee count of 0 means it is a new agreement.

[43] Self-Help Enterprises service area includes nine counties: Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tulare.

Recipient and Program	County or Region Covered	Funding Approved by State Water Board	Funding Remaining	Active Enrollees
Self-Help Enterprises Regional Private Domestic Water Well Abandonment, Repair, Replacement & Connection Program	San Joaquin Valley	$ 50,153,253	$11,768,487.81	382
Rural Community Assistance Corporation (SB108 Drinking Water Well Replacement Program)	Statewide except in SHE Service Area	$11,069,013	$5,301,528.03	97
Self-Help Enterprises Emergency Funding	San Joaquin Valley	$2,000,000	$2,000,000	0
Community Water Center Bottled Water	Regional[44]	$6,585,934	$3,553,086	502
Pueblo Unido Community Development Corporation – Interim Drinking Water Program	Riverside County	$2,265,437	$1,277,112.83	344
Santa Cruz County Regional Program	Santa Cruz County	$601,000	$498,847.69	9
Shasta County Drinking Water Drought Assistance Program	Shasta County	$2,474,998	$338,941.03	115
Imperial County Regional Point of Entry Installation and Urgent Drinking Water Needs Program	Imperial County	$3,184,725	$3,095,666.88	24
Valley Water Collaborative	Modesto and Turlock Groundwater Basins	$5,540,725	$4,466,961.06	347

[44] Santa Cruz, San Benito, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and portions of Santa Clara, Monterey, and Ventura Counties.

Recipient and Program	County or Region Covered	Funding Approved by State Water Board	Funding Remaining	Active Enrollees
Tule Basin Water Foundation	Tule Groundwater Basin	$4,528,822	$4,309,098.43	226
Drinking Water for Schools Program	Statewide	$6,435,000	$2,357,366.44	137
Bottled Water for Schools	Statewide	$4,547,038	$1,709,322.59	74

SAFER PROGRAM PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Public outreach and community engagement activities for the SAFER program are intended to increase early community involvement; keep local drinking water projects on track; identify potential risks, issues, or delays; build local capacity and create a path towards equitable and resilient water governance.

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The State Water Board has a robust Public Outreach and Engagement Strategy[45] to ensure SAFER program staff provide the public with multiple and diverse opportunities to participate. Since 2017, the State Water Board has hosted 165 public meetings and workshops, with approximately 8,396 participants (Table 18). The following summarizes the different types of stakeholder engagement activities implemented by the SAFER program.

Community Meetings & Workshops: Local community meetings and workshops were convened to discuss challenges and solutions. These discussions addressed administrator needs, consolidation projects, regionalization projects, operational needs, *etc*. Below are some of the projects where the State Water Board staff conducted community outreach and engagement to ensure a successful outcome.

> **Northern Tulare County Regional Drinking Water Solutions Project:** This project aims to explore and evaluate potential long-term drinking water solutions and governing options for a sustainable regional approach to serve the seven neighboring communities of Cutler, East Orosi, Monson, Orosi, Seville, Sultana, and Yettem. These communities are served by Cutler Public Utility District, Sultana Community Services District, Orosi Public Utility District, Yettem-Seville Community Services District, and East Orosi Community Services District. This project has the potential to successfully address existing water quality concerns in this region, mitigate potential future water challenges, and enable capacity for future development and growth. State Water Board staff

[45] SAFER Program Outreach and Engagement Strategy
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/docs/SAFER-Outreach-Engagement-Strategy-ADA.pdf

conduct outreach and engagement to these communities to build support for the project, identify needs and barriers, provide information on technical solutions and governance options, and collectively develop a vision for the region. This outreach includes public community meetings and attendance at each local water district board meeting.

San Lucas Community Drinking Water Solution: This project aims to support the San Lucas County Water District in identifying and selecting a potential technical solution to resolve water quality concerns regarding nitrate contaminants and aesthetic contaminants, including iron and manganese. The Water Board hosted public community meetings to ensure community voices are incorporated into the San Lucas County Water District decision-making process. These meetings discussed the differences between the potential water solutions being considered, the State Water Board's recommendations based on the final engineering report, and next steps the San Lucas County Water District's board can take to select a preferred solution and pursue funding for a long-term sustainable water quality solution for their community. These meetings also addressed questions and public comments weighing potential options to resolve their water quality concerns. The State Water Board also worked to address engagement concerns in the community, including language access at local district board meetings, and provided touch points as required to ensure both residents and local district board members are positioned to move forward with a solution.

Community Partner Initiative:

This project established a novel funding mechanism to partner with and fund community experts to conduct local outreach and engagement activities that achieve the following outcomes:

- Increase early community engagement with SAFER and ensure community buy-in
- Keep local drinking water projects on track
- Identify potential issues, risks or delays
- Build local community capacity
- Create a path toward equitable and resilient water governance

These local community water advocates are called community partners. Community partners are funded to perform outreach and engagement activities in communities with drinking water challenges. Community Partners foster inclusive cultures and are experts in grassroots organizing, community education, outreach and engagement, and community capacity building. These community partners are key community members who are working to improve drinking water conditions in their areas and are under-resourced to effectively continue this work. This project provides a framework to recruit, onboard, and support community partners while also enabling direct funding to compensate them for their time and effort spent working on drinking water projects in their communities. These community partners are seen as key members of drinking

water project teams, which may also include representatives from the DDW, the DFA, the Office of Public Engagement, Equity, and Tribal Affairs, and technical assistance providers. This project is modeled on the promotor concept of local community support for public health initiatives seen across Latin America.

SAFER Advisory Group Convenings[46]: The SAFER Advisory Group[47] provides the State Water Board with feedback and constructive advice on the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, the Fund Expenditure Plan, and other related policies and analyses. The SAFER Advisory Group is composed of 20 appointed members that represent public water systems, technical assistance providers, local agencies, nongovernmental organizations, the public and residents served by community water systems in disadvantaged communities, state small water systems, and domestic wells. The SAFER Advisory Group meets up to four times a year either virtually and/or at locations throughout California to provide many opportunities for public and community input. All meetings are widely publicized, open to the public, and offer translation services.

Needs Assessment Workshops: The State Water Board provides stakeholders with opportunities to support the development and refinement of the methodologies employed in the Needs Assessment. Since 2019, the State Water Board has hosted 28 public workshops associated with the Needs Assessment. These workshops are typically hosted virtually to maximize public participation.

Table 18: SAFER Program Public Engagement (2019-2025)[48, 49]

Year	# of Meetings	# of Participants	# of Meetings with Interpretation Services
2025	11	295	11
2024	8	425	3
2023	26[50]	1,566	11
2022	32[51]	1,484	10
2021	48	1,572	27
2020	38	3,054	N/A
2019	2[52]	N/A	N/A
TOTAL:	**165**	**8,396**	**62**

[46] SAFER Calendar: https://waterboards.ca.gov/safer/calendar.html
[47] SAFER Advisory Group: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory_group.html
[48] Count of participants includes unique participants or registrants per event. If an attendee participated in multiple meetings, their participation is included for each event.
[49] The State Water Board provided interpretation services upon request. Information regarding interpretation services provided for meetings prior to 2021 is not available.
[50] Five meetings were held virtually and nine in-person.
[51] 29 meetings were held virtually and three in-person.
[52] This count represents two Needs Assessment related workshops hosted in 2019. It likely under-reports the number of SAFER program related meetings in 2019 because, at that time, this information was not tracked.

TRIBAL WATER SYSTEM ENGAGEMENT

The State Water Board recognizes the sovereignty of California Native American Tribes and understands that tribes face unique challenges in providing clean, safe, and affordable drinking water to their communities. Meaningful engagement with California Native American Tribes is fundamental to the mission of the Water Boards.

Over the last seven years, program efforts have focused on: 1) building relationships and collaboration with state and federal partners, and 2) providing outreach and education about the SAFER program to tribes, tribal governments, and tribal communities.

In 2025, SAFER Tribal Affairs staff participated in initial funding discussions with 13 different tribes to determine if the SAFER Program could support tribal projects and priorities. We are working with Tribal staff to develop funding applications and anticipate at least three applications to be submitted for the 2026-2027 fiscal year. Staff also participated in six multi-agency meetings, one U.S. EPA Region 9 Water Coordination meeting, and six task force meetings hosted by various agencies to address tribal environmental and water needs.

Collaboration with state and federal partners has been beneficial in both identifying tribal water systems in need and finding unique and collaborative ways to meet those needs. Agency partners meet on a regular basis to strategize solutions for tribal partners. Through this collaboration, staff have identified how the SAFER program's unique funding tools can be used to fill federal funding gaps that impede progress and help to support tribally-led and sustainable tribal water solutions.

SAFER program staff actively seek to engage tribal communities through regular presentations and information sharing at various tribal-focused events. These events include tribal conferences and summits, the Assembly Committee on Native American Affairs, tribal board presentations, and community events. Meeting with tribal leadership at in-person events has proven invaluable in building trust and better understanding tribal-specific opportunities available through the SAFER program by obtaining feedback from tribes about the best ways to engage with them.

In addition to the above engagement strategies, there are new California laws that dictate the State Water Board's engagement with tribes, and how we handle tribal information and data submitted to the State Water Board. Below are two laws that directly impact the SAFER program's work with tribes.

In January 2023, Assembly Bill 2877 (AB 2877)[53] was passed to amend Health and Safety Code Section 116766 and further address barriers to funding tribal water solutions and is specific to the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund. AB 2877 requires the State Water Board's Tribal Liaison or their designee to participate in discussions with tribes that are eligible recipients for funding from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund. As a result of AB

[53] Assembly Bill 2877
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220AB2877

2877, internal and external collaboration increased, resulting in an improved understanding of tribal drinking water needs and advancement of tribal drinking water projects.

On January 1, 2026, Assembly Bill 1004 (AB 1004)[54] went into effect. Codified in Government Code Section 8450, AB 1004 protects the confidentiality of tribal financial information provided as a condition of receiving financial assistance. New agreements with tribes will contain a provision stating that financial information disclosed pursuant to the agreement shall not be open to public inspection.

As federal agencies experience financial and staff uncertainties, it is anticipated there may be more reliance on state resources to fill those gaps. The uncertainty in federal funding highlights the importance of cross-jurisdictional collaboration to advance mutual priorities of ensuring the Human Right to Water for tribal communities. The State Water Board remains committed to working alongside tribal, state, and federal partners to ensure tribal communities have access to safe and reliable drinking water and sustainable wastewater solutions.

NEW PROGRAMS & TOOLS

The State Water Board implements and enforces legislative and regulatory requirements to ensure the Human Right to Water is achieved. In 2025, several new regulatory developments—SB 466, SB 131, SB 840, AB 1207, and AB 1096—were introduced that directly impact the SAFER program or the broader Capacity Development Strategy. There were also no modifications to the state's control points for assessing capacity for new public water systems. The Appendix: New Legislation Related to the SAFER Program and Capacity Development Strategy[55] includes a full summary of relevant legislation and Board resolutions directly and indirectly related to the SAFER Program and the State Water Board's broader Drinking Water Capacity Strategy.

NEW LEGISLATION (2025)

Below is a list of new legislation in 2025. See Appendix: New Legislation Related to the SAFER Program and Capacity Development Strategy[56] for more information.

- Senate Bill 466[57]- Drinking water: hexavalent chromium: civil liability: exemption.
- Senate Bill 131[58]- Committee on budget and fiscal review.

[54] Assembly Bill 1004
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1004&utm
[55] Appendix: New Legislation Related to the SAFER Program and Capacity Development Strategy
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026-legislation-safer-capdev.pdf
[56] Appendix: New Legislation Related to the SAFER Program and Capacity Development Strategy
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026-legislation-safer-capdev.pdf
[57] Bill Text- SB 466- Drinking water: hexavalent chromium: civil liability: exemption
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260SB466&showamends=false
[58] Bill Text- SB 131 Committee on Budget and Fiscal Review-CEQA exemptions
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260SB131

- Senate Bill 840[59]-Greenhouse gas reduction fund.
- Assembly Bill 1207[60]- Climate change: market-based compliance mechanism: extension.
- Assembly Bill 1096[61]-Water: school sites: lead testing

NEW STATE WATER BOARD RESOLUTIONS (2025)

FUND EXPENDITURE PLAN:[62] On November 4, 2025, the State Water Board adopted Resolution No. 2025-0034, adopting the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP).[63] Expenditures from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (SADW Fund) on and after July 1, 2025, must be consistent with the FEP. The resolution adopts the FEP and authorizes the Deputy Director of DFA, or his or her designee, to approve or deny funding from the SADW Fund, for uses consistent with the FEP.

CLEARINGHOUSE REPORTING

On January 1, 2025, DDW issued a revised Technical Reporting Order[64] to all public water systems that amended reporting requirements for water shortage, source condition, and supply and demand data that have been in place under the prior orders beginning in 2023. The amendment included updates to reporting deadlines, clarification of monthly reporting requirements, and confirmation of enforcement authority for reporting violations occurring prior to the amendment. The SAFER Clearinghouse is the reporting platform used to submit this data.[65]

The intent of reporting in the SAFER Clearinghouse is to satisfy multiple reporting requirements utilizing one reporting portal. These platforms include: monthly Conservation Reporting for Urban Retail Water Suppliers, Drought Resiliency (Senate Bill 552) for small communities and non-transient non-community schools, and supply and demand reporting for all public water systems previously submitted to the electronic Annual Report. This reporting continued in 2025 with an amendment to the Technical Reporting Order.

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[59] Bill Text- SB 840- Greenhouse Gases: Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260SB840
[60] Bill Text- AB 1207: Climate change: market-based compliance mechanism: extension
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billNavClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1207
[61] Bill Text- AB 1096- Water: school sites: lead testing
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billCompareClient.xhtml?bill_id=202520260AB1096&showamends=false
[62] Fiscal Year 2025-26 Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP)
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/docs/2025/fy2025-26-fep-final-1125.pdf
[63] Fiscal Year 2025-26 Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP)
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/docs/2025/fy2025-26-fep-final-1125.pdf
[64] AMENDMENT NO. 1 TO ORDER REQUIRING ONLINE TECHNICAL REPORTING DDW_HQ_2024_001
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2025/ddw-technical-order.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[65] Drought & Conservation Reporting Webpage
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/clearinghouse_drought_conservation_reporting.html

WATER SYSTEM REPORTING IN THE CLEARINGHOUSE

In 2025, 6,948 water systems had accounts with the Water System Reporting in the SAFER Clearinghouse. Over 35,000 reports were submitted, 38% percent of which came from community water systems. 759 water systems had past-due reports.

SYSTEM AREA BOUNDARY LAYER (SABL)

The State Water Board maintains a geospatial dataset of water service area boundaries for California public water systems, known as the System Area Boundary Layer (SABL).[66] To provide an accurate dataset of these boundaries, the State Water Board has undertaken a project to review, add, and correct public water system boundaries that were collected under previous efforts. All missing community water system boundaries have been added to the SABL layer as of 2024. Efforts to verify and correct boundaries are ongoing and are expected to be completed by the end of 2027.

In 2025, the State Water Board verified 467 existing boundaries that were either pending or not verified, for a total of 4,963.[67] SABL is an essential dataset utilized in the Needs Assessment to calculate risk indicator datapoints for water systems such as median household income, location in critically over drafted groundwater basin, and household socioeconomic burden. SABL is also used to determine potential consolidation or intertie projects. Accurate system boundaries improve the findings of the Needs Assessment.

STATE SMALL WATER SYSTEMS & DOMESTIC WELL INVENTORY & WATER QUALITY DATA

SB 200 (Health and Safety Code § 116772) requires county health officers and other relevant local agencies to electronically submit state small water system and domestic well water quality testing results (performed by accredited laboratories) to the State Water Board. The collection and submittal of water quality testing and associated data for state small water systems and domestic wells have, historically, been performed at the county level with little to no oversight or support from the State Water Board. In 2021, the State Water Board developed and shared with counties a guidance document on how to comply with SB 200 reporting requirements.[68]

[66] California Drinking Water System Boundaries
https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/home/item.html?id=fbba842bf134497c9d611ad506ec48cc
[67] The total count of 4,963 includes only Water Service Area types. It excludes Jurisdictional and Wholesaler types. Boundary counts reflect systems with Activity Status = A (active) and do not include those with Status = I (inactive) or P (pending).
[68] State Small Water System and Domestic Well Water Quality Data Submission Guidance for Counties
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/ssws_dw_data_submittal_guidance.pdf

ABOUT THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT

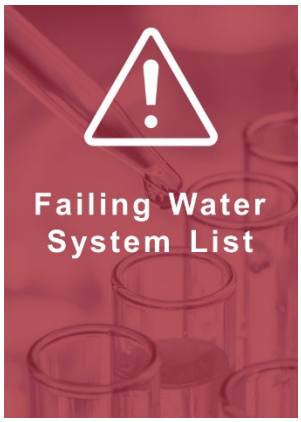
In 2016, the State Water Board adopted a resolution making the Human Right to Water (HR2W), as defined in Assembly Bill 685, a primary consideration and priority across all state and regional board programs.[69] The HR2W recognizes that "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and 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 establish the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) program. SB 200 established a set of tools, funding sources, and regulatory authorities the State Water Board can harness through the SAFER program to help struggling water systems sustainably and affordably provide safe drinking water to their customers. Among the tools created under SB 200 is the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (SADWF). The Fund provides up to $130 million per year through 2030 to enable the State Water Board to develop and implement sustainable solutions for underperforming drinking water systems.

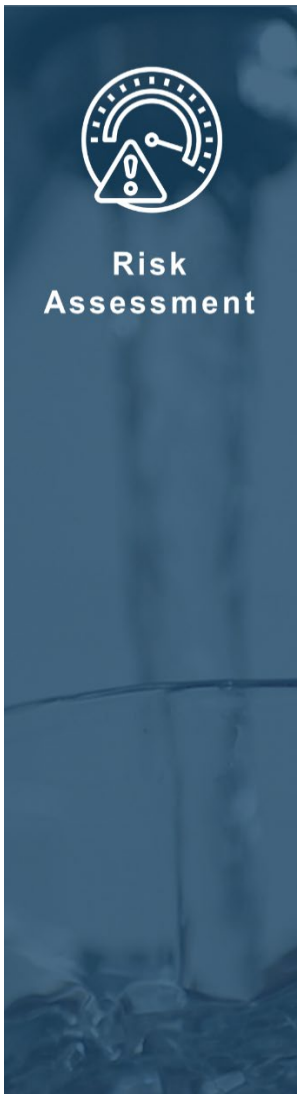
The SAFER program harnesses the SADWF together with other State Water Board financial assistance programs to advance the implementation of interim and long-term solutions for communities across the state. The State Water Board prioritizes SAFER program funding annually through the SADWF's Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP). The annual FEP should be informed by "data and analysis drawn from the drinking water Needs Assessment**,**" as required by California Health and Safety Code section 116769.

The State Water Board's Drinking Water Needs Assessment (Needs Assessment) consists of four core components: the Failing Water System List (Failing list), Risk Assessment, Cost Assessment, and Affordability Assessment.

[69] State Water Board Resolution No. 2016-0010
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/board_decisions/adopted_orders/resolutions/2016/rs2016_0010.pdf



Since 2017, the State Water Board has assessed water systems that fail to meet the goals of the HR2W and maintains a list and map of these systems on its website. Systems that are on the Failing list are those that are out of compliance or consistently fail to meet drinking water standards. Systems that are assessed for meeting the Failing list criteria include community water systems and non-community water systems that serve schools and daycares.[70] The Failing list criteria was expanded in April 2021 & 2024 and may be refined over time.



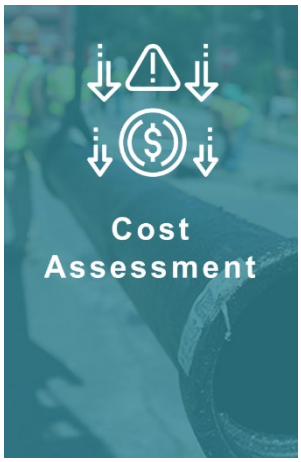
SB 200 directs the State Water Board to identify "public water systems, community water systems, and state small water systems that may be at risk of failing to provide an adequate supply of safe drinking water" and "an estimate of the number of households that are served by domestic wells or state small water systems in high-risk areas."[71] Therefore, the annual Needs Assessment report contains a Risk Assessment that uses different methodologies to analyze risk across these types of systems, as follows:

Public Water Systems
The Risk Assessment methodology utilizes indicators to identify non-transient, non-community systems serving K-12 schools and community water systems, serving up to 30,000 service connections and up to 100,000 population, that are at risk of failing. These indicators assess risk in the following categories: water quality, accessibility, affordability, and technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) capacity.

State Small Water Systems & Domestic Wells
The Risk Assessment methodology for state small water systems and domestic wells utilizes indicators to assess risk in the following categories: water quality, water shortage, and socioeconomic risk.

Tribal Water Systems
The State Water Board is partnering with Indian Health Services, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and tribal communities to understand the best way to integrate tribal drinking water needs into the Needs Assessment.[72]

[70] Failing Water System Criteria
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/hr2w/docs/hr2w_expanded_criteria.pdf
[71] California Health and Safety Code section 116769
[72] Not enough data is available to identify At-Risk tribal water systems or conduct Affordability Assessment.



SB 200 directs the State Water Board to "estimate the funding needed for the next fiscal year based on the amount available in the fund, anticipated funding needs, other existing funding sources."[73] Thus, the Cost Assessment estimates the costs related to the implementation of interim and/or emergency measures and longer-term solutions for Failing and At-Risk public water systems and high-risk state small water systems and domestic wells. Due to minor changes to the number of Failing and At-Risk systems, the State Water Board did not update the Cost Assessment estimates in the 2026 Needs Assessment.

SB 200 calls for the identification of "any community water system that serves a disadvantaged community that must charge fees that exceed the affordability threshold established by the board in order to supply, treat, and distribute potable water that complies with federal and state drinking water standards."[74] The Affordability Assessment evaluates several different affordability indicators that compare a customer's average water expenses to their socioeconomic risk to identify communities that may be experiencing affordability challenges. The Affordability Assessment is conducted for all community water systems and non-transient, non-community systems serving K-12 schools and determines the number of affordability indicators exceeded by each system.

DEVELOPMENT AND ENHANCEMENT PROCESS

The State Water Board's Needs Analysis Unit in the Division of Drinking Water (DDW) leads the development of the annual Needs Assessment in coordination with the Division of Water Quality (DWQ), Division of Financial Assistance (DFA), and Division of Information Technology (DIT).

The State Water Board developed the foundational methodologies utilized in the Needs Assessment in 2019 and 2020 through multiple public workshops and a one-time contract with the University of California, Los Angeles Luskin Center for Innovation (UCLA) (agreement term: 09.01.2019 through 03.31.2021).[75] The State Water Board has also partnered with the

[73] California Health and Safety Code section 116769.
[74] California Health and Safety Code section 116769 (2) (B).
[75] Before SB 200 was passed in 2019, the Legislature appropriated $3 million in 2018 via Senate Bill 862 (Budget Act of 2018) to implement a "Needs Analysis" on the state of drinking water in California.

Department of Water Resources (DWR) and the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) to further enhance the Needs Assessment.

The State Water Board is committed to engaging the public and key stakeholder groups to solicit feedback and recommendations to inform the development of the Needs Assessment methodologies. Since 2019, 28 workshops (some covering multiple component topics) have been hosted to inform the core methodologies (Figure 3). No workshops were offered in 2024 and 2025, as there were no significant changes in methodologies during that period. White papers, presentations, public comments and webinar recordings can be found on the State Water Board's Needs Assessment webpage.[76] The State Water Board will continue to host public workshops to provide opportunities for stakeholders to learn about and contribute to its efforts to enhance and develop a more robust Needs Assessment.

Figure 3: Number of Public Workshops on Needs Assessment Methodologies

NEEDS ASSESSMENT COMPONENTS	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Failing List		1	1	1	2	0	0
Risk Assessment: Public Water Systems	1	3	1	2	3	0	0
Risk Assessment: State Small Water Systems & Domestic Wells	1	4	2	2	3	0	0
Cost Assessment	3	2	2	3	5	0	0
Affordability Assessment		2	1	5	3	0	0

HOW THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT IS UTILIZED BY THE STATE WATER BOARD

The State Water Board conducts the Needs Assessment annually to inform the annual SAFER Fund Expenditure Plan, support implementation of the SAFER program and advance its water system Technical, Managerial, Financial (TMF) Capacity Development Strategy.

SAFER PROGRAM

The results of the Needs Assessment are used by the State Water Board and the SAFER Advisory Group[77] to inform prioritization of public water systems, tribal water systems, state small water systems and domestic wells for funding in the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water

[76] Drinking Water Needs Assessment I State Water Board
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/needs.html
[77] SAFER Advisory Group: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory_group.html

Fund Expenditure Plan; guide State Water Board technical assistance; and develop strategies for implementing interim and long-term solutions (Figure 4).

Figure 4: How the Needs Assessment is Utilized by the SAFER Program

The SAFER program's goal is to ensure that all Californians can access safe drinking water. Meeting this goal requires solving many difficult, multi-faceted problems and addressing aspects of long-term disparities, especially in disadvantaged communities.

PUBLIC WATER SYSTEM CAPACITY DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

The Capacity Development program was established as a key component of the 1996 federal Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA) Amendments. The Amendments were passed by Congress in part because of the significant problems small public water systems were having providing safe and reliable drinking water to their customers. The SDWA emphasizes prevention and assistance, both financial and technical, to resolve these problems. The Amendments have provided incentives (including funding) for each state to develop a Capacity Development program to assist public water systems in building TMF capacity.[78] The Capacity Development program provides a framework for states and water systems to work together to protect public health.

The SDWA allows states the flexibility to develop strategies to meet their individual needs. California's initial Capacity Development Strategy was adopted in 2000,[79] and in 2022 the State Water Board engaged with stakeholders through two public workshops to update the Strategy to better align with the SAFER program and new federal requirements.[80] Stakeholders helped identify barriers to capacity development and shaped the Strategy's eight core Elements (Table 19). No changes to the Strategy have been made since 2022.

Many elements from the previous Strategy have been revised to incorporate the activities implemented through the SAFER program. The Needs Assessment is a core component of Element 2, "Identification & Prioritization of Existing Systems in Need of Improved TMF

[78] State Water Board Capacity Development Webpage
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/TMF.html
[79] 2000 Capacity Development Strategy
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/cd_strategy.pdf
[80] California Capacity Development Strategy for Public Water Systems (2022)
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/docs/2022/2022-capdev-strategy-v2.pdf

Capacity" and Element 8, "Measuring TMF Capacity Building Success." The results of the Needs Assessment help ensure the State Water Board and the public have the information needed to advance capacity development activities for Failing and At-Risk water systems. The Needs Assessment provides an annual update on State Water Board activities and progress in implementing the State Water Board's Capacity Development Strategy Elements.

Table 19: Capacity Development Strategy Elements

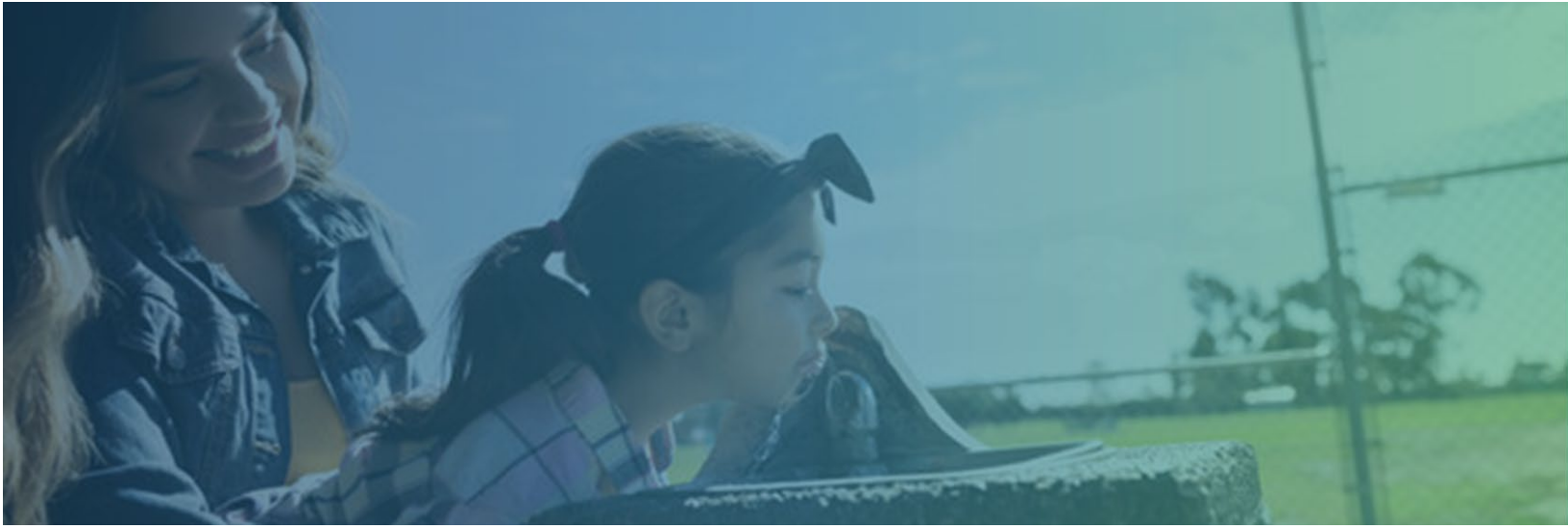
Number	Capacity Development Strategic Elements
Element 1	Ensuring NEW Public Water Systems have TMF Capacity

Element 2	Identification & Prioritization of Existing Systems in Need of Improved TMF Capacity
	• Needs Assessment
	  ○ Failing Water Systems
	  ○ Risk Assessment
	  ○ Cost Assessment
	  ○ Affordability Assessment

Element 3	Supporting Direct Capacity Building • Water System Partnerships & Consolidation • Administrators • Engagement Units • Operator Certification • Sanitary Surveys
Element 4	Supporting Capacity Building Work of Third-Party Organizations • Technical Assistance
Element 5	Ensuring TMF Capacity of State Funding & Financing Recipients
Element 6	Promoting Asset Management
Element 7	Building Capacity Through Complete and Accurate Data Gathering and Reporting
Element 8	Measuring TMF Capacity Building Success

In 2025, 35 new public water systems were created, 37 were deactivated, and 7 went from public to non-public. Over the past three years, 95 new public water systems were created and none of the newly permitted systems have been identified on U.S. EPA's Enforcement Targeting Tool (ETT) as priority systems under the Enforcement Response Policy (ERP).[81]

[81] Drinking Water Enforcement Response Policy and Enforcement Targeting Tool https://www.epa.gov/tribaldrinkingwater/drinking-water-enforcement-response-policy-and-enforcement-targeting-tool



FAILING PUBLIC WATER SYSTEMS

OVERVIEW

On September 25, 2012, Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. signed Assembly Bill (AB) 685, making California the first state in the nation to legislatively recognize the human right to water (HR2W). Now in the Water Code as Section 106.3, the state statutorily recognizes that "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes." The HR2W extends to all Californians, regardless of socioeconomic status or whether they live in rural or urban communities.

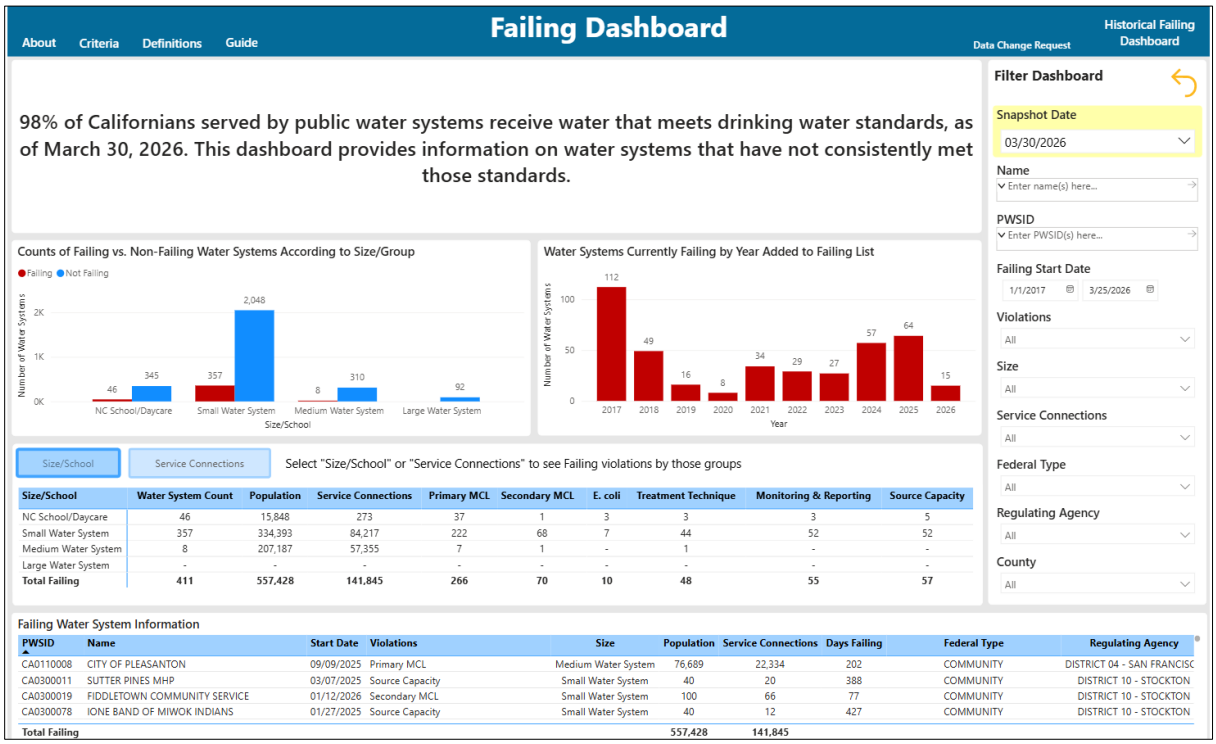
On February 16, 2016, the State Water Board adopted a resolution identifying HR2W as a top priority and core value of the Board. The resolution stated the State Water Board will work "to preserve, enhance, and restore the quality of California's water resources and drinking water for the protection of the environment, public health, and all beneficial uses, and to ensure proper water resource allocation and efficient use, for the benefit of present and future generations." The Failing list methodology is detailed at Failing Water Systems: The Human Right to Water (HR2W) List Criteria[82]

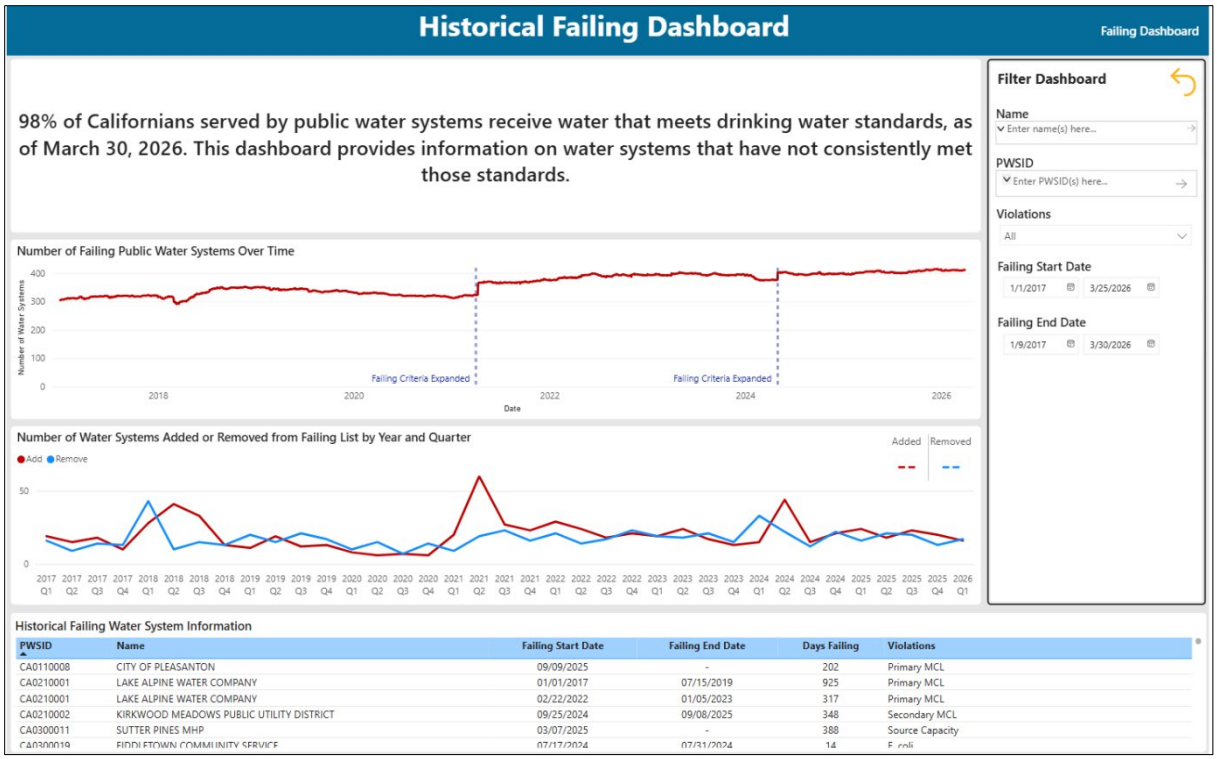
The results of the historical and the current list of Failing water systems are accessible online through the State Water Board's Failing Water System Dashboards.[83] The Dashboards are updated quarterly. The Failing Dashboard (Figure 5, Upper Panel) displays water systems currently designated as Failing as of the dashboard's refresh date. It includes summary figures and tables presenting data on the number of Failing water systems, categorized by water system size groups and service connection groups. A detailed data table with extensive filtering capabilities allows users to view individual water system information, including Failing start date, violation type contributing to Failing status, size group, population served, number of service connections, federal water system type, regulating agency, and county. Additional reference buttons in the top left of the dashboard provide definitions, criteria, and background

[82] Failing Water System Criteria
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/hr2w/docs/hr2w_expanded_criteria.pdf
[83] Failing Water System Dashboard
https://app.powerbigov.us/view?r=eyJrIjoiYWZmNWU1OTctYWY5ZS00YTQxLWFiM2EtODFkN2RlZGVhZjZjIiwidCI6ImZlMTg2YTI1LTdkNDktNDFlNi05OTQxLTA1ZDIyODFkMzZjMSJ9

information explaining relevant terminology and methodology. A prominently displayed message at the top of the dashboard indicates the percentage of Californians served by public water systems that are currently meeting drinking water standards. The Historical Failing Dashboard (Figure 5, Lower Panel) presents data on all water systems that have appeared on the Failing list since 2017, including those that have returned to compliance and been removed from the list. It includes summary figures illustrating the number of water systems on the Failing list for each day, as well as the number of systems added to and removed from the list on a quarterly basis since 2017. A filterable data table allows users to examine individual water system records, including Failing start and end dates and the violation types that contributed to each system's Failing designation.

Figure 5: Needs Assessment Failing Water System Dashboards





Statewide, the top contaminants that contributed to higher proportions of systems on the Failing list are nitrate/nitrate-nitrite, arsenic, and 1,2,3-trichloropropane for primary MCL violations and manganese and iron for secondary MCL violations.

RISK ASSESSMENT RESULTS FOR PUBLIC WATER SYSTEMS

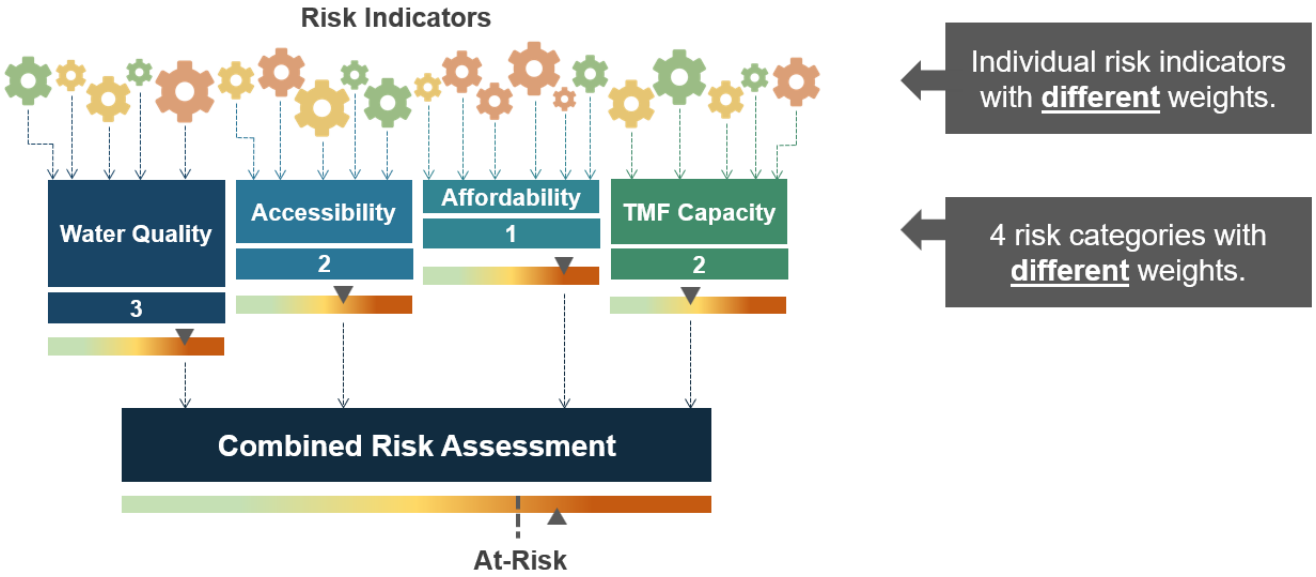
OVERVIEW

The purpose of the Risk Assessment for public water systems is to identify systems at risk of failing to meet one or more key Human Right to Water goals: (1) providing safe drinking water; (2) accessible drinking water; (3) affordable drinking water; and/or (4) maintaining a sustainable water system. Data on performance and risk is most readily available for public water systems and thus the Risk Assessment methodology for public water systems allows for a multi-faceted examination across four risk indicator categories: Water Quality, Accessibility, Affordability; and Technical, Managerial, and Financial (TMF) Capacity.

The Risk Assessment methodology is detailed in 2026 Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Water Systems.[84] Figure 6 below illustrates the multi-tiered Risk Assessment methodology used to evaluate water systems. The framework begins with a set of individual risk indicators, each assigned a different weight, which feed into four distinct risk categories: Water Quality, Accessibility, Affordability, and TMF Capacity. Each risk category is also weighted, reflecting its relative importance in the overall assessment. The weighted scores from all four risk categories are then aggregated into a Combined Risk Assessment, which is represented by a color gradient scale ranging from low to high risk. Water systems that exceed a defined threshold on this combined risk scale are designated as At-Risk, indicating they may require intervention or assistance to ensure the continued delivery of safe and reliable drinking water to their communities.

[84] Appendix: Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Water Systems https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026risk-assessment-pws-methodology.pdf

Figure 6: Illustration of the Risk Assessment Methodology



RISK ASSESSMENT RESULTS

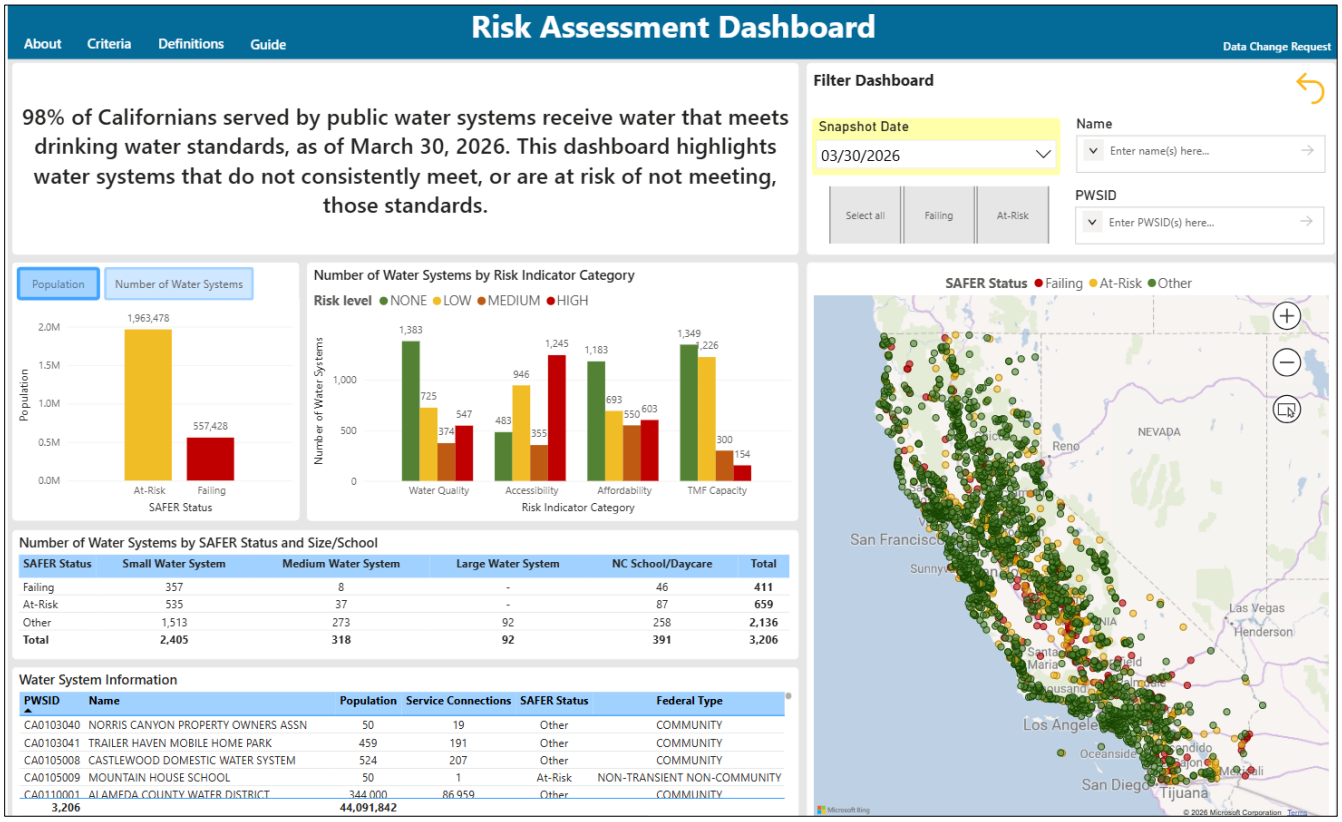
The results of the Risk Assessment are presented as a water system's "SAFER Status." If a water system's SAFER Status is currently Failing, it is labeled as Failing regardless of its Risk Assessment results. Once the water system comes off the Failing list, its Risk Assessment result (At-Risk or Other) will replace its SAFER Status.

The results of the Risk Assessment are accessible online through the State Water Board's Risk Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems.[85] The Risk Assessment Dashboard (Figure 7) provides a quarterly-updated overview of the risk status of public water systems across California. A message displayed at the top of the dashboard indicates the percentage of Californians served by public water systems currently meeting drinking water standards as of the most recent snapshot date. The dashboard includes total number of water systems, water systems classified as Failing and At-Risk, and water systems by risk level across the four risk categories of Water Quality, Accessibility, Affordability, and TMF Capacity. Summary tables provide a breakdown of water systems by type and by SAFER status – At-Risk, Failing, and Other – cross-tabulated by system size. A filterable data table allows users to view individual water system records, including population served, service connections, SAFER status, federal water system type, and regulating agency. An interactive map of California displays the geographic distribution of water systems, color-coded by SAFER status. Reference buttons on top left corner of the dashboard for About, Criteria, Definitions, and Guide provide additional context on terminology, methodology, and using the dashboard. Note that the methodology used to determine Median Household Income (MHI) in the Risk

[85] Risk Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems
https://app.powerbigov.us/view?r=eyJrIjoiNmJmMjY0ZTYtOTU2NS00Y2ZlLWExMDAtNDI5YTk4YThjMTdhIiwidCI6ImZlMTg2YTI1LTdkNDktNDFlNi05OTQxLTA1ZDIyODFkMzZjMSJ9

Assessment has been updated. The revised MHI values will be reflected in the Risk Assessment starting with the 2026 second-quarter update.

Figure 7: Risk Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems



DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF FAILING AND AT-RISK PUBLIC WATER SYSTEMS

Results for the 2026 Risk Assessment for public water systems can be combined with demographic data to better understand the populations that are most at-risk. The demographic analysis methodology is detailed in Appendix: GIS Methodology for Calculating Data.[86] However, there are several limitations to this demographic analysis. Demographic data is collected at the census tract or block group-level, and current census surveys do not indicate household drinking water source information. Therefore, the demographic information presented in the tables below may not represent the actual population served by water systems. Any interpretation of these results should keep in mind the limitations of the analysis.

[86] Appendix: GIS Methodology for Calculating Data https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/general-gis-methodology.pdf

Demographic data come from Draft CalEnviroScreen 5.0 and the American Community Survey. CalEnviroScreen 5.0 identifies California communities facing socioeconomic and health-related challenges and a high environmental burden. CalEnviroScreen combines a Population Characteristics Score, which captures social and health vulnerability, and a Pollution Burden Score, which captures exposure to environmental hazards and pollutants to assign each census tract in California an overall cumulative impact score. The Population Characteristics and Pollution Burden Scores both range from 0 to 10, with scores of 10 indicating the highest vulnerability to environmental hazards and socioeconomic or health challenges, respectively.[87] The overall score is calculated by multiplying the Population Characteristics and Pollution Burden Scores, where 100 indicates the most vulnerable. Data for poverty, linguistic isolation (percentage of limited English-speaking households), household size, and race/ethnicity, as well as data used to calculated median household income and disadvantaged community status was taken from the most recently available 5-Year American Community Survey estimates.[88] The socioeconomic analysis was calculated using water service area boundaries and census tract or block group boundaries to determine area-weighted averages for most demographic indicators.[89] Median household income and disadvantaged community status were calculated using a separate methodology described in the Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology.[90] Therefore, this methodology may be biased towards demographic data from larger census tracts and block groups that are less populated and more rural. Table 20 summarizes the findings of the demographic analysis for water systems included in the Risk Assessment. When compared with other water systems, Failing and At-Risk public water systems areas tend to have higher CalEnviroScreen scores, a higher percentage of population in poverty, a higher percentage of limited English-speaking households, and a larger household size. Failing and At-Risk water systems are also more likely to serve disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities and majority communities of color.

[87] Population Characteristics for each census tract are derived from the average percentiles for three sensitive populations indicators (asthma, cardiovascular disease, and low birth weight) and five socioeconomic factors indicators (educational attainment, housing-burdened low-income households, linguistic isolation, poverty, and unemployment). The Pollution Burden score for each census tract combines seven pollution exposure indicators (ozone/PM2.5 concentrations, diesel particulate matter emissions, drinking water contaminants, children's lead risk from housing, pesticide use, toxic releases from facilities, and traffic density) and five environmental effects indicators (cleanup sites, impaired water bodies, groundwater threats, hazardous waste facilities and generators, and solid waste sites and facilities). The score ranges from 0.1-10 with 10 being the most pollution burden. The average population characteristics and pollution burden score for each water system is calculated as the area-weighted average of census tract-level scores. More information on CalEnviroscreen can be found at OEHHA CalEnviroScreen: https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen.

[88] American Community Survey Data: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html

[89] More information on the area-weighted methodology can be found in the Appendix: GIS Methodology for Calculating Data: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/general-gis-methodology.pdf.

[90] Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026mhi-calculation.pdf

Table 20: Demographic Analysis for Water Systems of Different SAFER Statuses

Community Characteristics	Statewide (all areas)	Other	At-Risk	Failing
Total Count of Systems	**3,212**	**2,152**	**654**	**406**
Average CalEnviroScreen 5.0 Score (Out of 100, w/ 100 indicating highest burden)	25.3	22.8	29.5	31.6
Average CalEnviroScreen 5.0 Population Characteristics Score (Out of 10, w/ 10 being most vulnerable)	4.80	4.61	5.09	5.37
Average CalEnviroScreen 5.0 Pollution Burden Score (Out of 10, w/ 10 being most pollution burden)	5.04	4.76	5.56	5.67
Average percentage of the population living below twice the federal poverty level	29.4%	26.6%	34.8%	35.6%
Average percentage of households with limited English-speaking (linguistically isolated)	5.4%	4.5%	6.7%	8.2%
Average household size[91]	2.8	2.7	2.8	2.9
Percentage serving Disadvantaged or Severely Disadvantaged Communities	66.4% (2,132)	68.2% (1,468)	78.1% (511)	79.1% (321)
Percentage serving majority communities of color	46.0%	43.3%	50.0%	53.5%

RISK ASSESSMENT TRENDS ANALYSIS

SAFER STATUS TRENDS

Table 21 and Figure 8 compare the number of water systems with Failing or At-risk status from the 2021 through 2026 assessments. It is important to note that the Risk criteria as well as data collection has evolved since 2021, which affects how results change over time. The most significant changes in the Risk Assessment were observed between 2021 and 2022, primarily due to substantial revisions to the risk indicators and adjustments to risk thresholds. Additionally, in 2022, the inventory of assessed systems was expanded to include medium-sized community water systems. Between 2022 and 2023, there was a major update in Affordability category indicators, along with adjustments to the calculation methodology for several indicators. Another notable change took place between 2023 and 2024, driven by improved data collection related to bottled and/or hauled water reliance. The Failing list criteria

[91] Block groups that had 0 households (145 out of 25,607 total block groups) were not included in the average.

expanded in 2021 to include additional Treatment Technical violations and Monitoring and Reporting violations, and further expanded in 2024 to include Source Capacity and Water Outage violations.

Figure 8: Count of Water Systems Grouped by SAFER Status (based on 2021-2026 Risk Assessment)

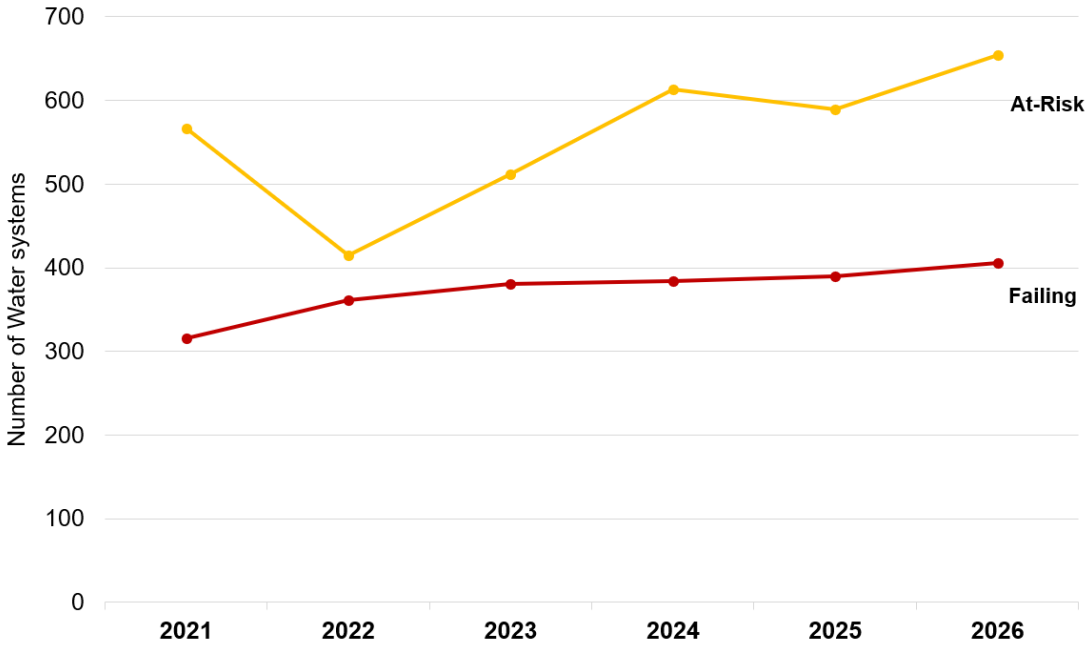


Table 21: Count of Water Systems with Failing or At-risk Status (based on 2021-2026 Risk Assessment)

System Type	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2026
Failing	316	361	381	384	390	406
At-Risk	567	415	512	613	589	654

RISK ASSESSMENT RESULTS FOR STATE SMALL WATER SYSTEMS & DOMESTIC WELLS

OVERVIEW

Figure 9: Categories of Risk

The Risk Assessment for state small water systems and domestic wells focuses on identifying areas where groundwater may be more likely to contain contaminants above safe drinking water standards, areas where water shortage may be more likely, and areas with higher socioeconomic burdens. This information is presented as an online dashboard.[92] Water quality risk data is from the State Water Board's Aquifer Risk Map,[93] water shortage risk data is from the Department of Water Resources (DWR) Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool for Self-Supplied Communities,[94] and socioeconomic risk data was developed by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment. Previous work is available on the State Water Board's Needs Assessment webpage.[95]

[92] Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=ece2b3ca1f66401d9ae4bfce2e6a0403

[93] Aquifer Risk Map Webtool https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=18c7d253f0a44fd2a5c7bcfb42cc158d

[94] Water Shortage Vulnerability for Self-Supplied Communities https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/ae1b4e3e41004f07b4901a7a3fa50637/

[95] State Water Board I Drinking Water Needs Assessment https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/needs.html

RISK CATEGORY DATA

The State Water Board has limited water quality, water shortage, and location data for state small water systems and domestic wells, as these systems are not regulated by the state, nor are maximum contaminant levels directly applicable to domestic wells. Due to the lack of data from actual state small water systems and domestic wells, it is difficult to precisely determine the count of state small water systems and domestic wells that may be At-Risk.

Water Quality

The risk analysis in the water quality category uses groundwater quality data in the square mile sections immediately surrounding or next to the location of the state small water systems and domestic wells to identify where shallow groundwater quality may exceed primary drinking water standards, notification or action levels. *These data do not directly assess the compliance of state small water systems and domestic wells with state or federal water quality standards.* As a result, the presence of a given state small water system or domestic well within an "At-Risk" area does not signify that they are known to be accessing groundwater with contaminants above drinking water standards.

Water Shortage

The risk analysis in the water shortage category, conducted by DWR, includes a suite of risk indicators that identify areas where state small water systems and domestic wells may experience water shortage issues.[96] The risk indicators utilize modeled data and observed data to assess the risk of water shortages. As a result, the presence of a given state small water system or domestic well within an "At-Risk" area does not signify that the well has gone dry or is currently experiencing water shortage problems.

Socioeconomic Risk

The socioeconomic risk is based on county and census data, which does not differentiate state small water system and domestic well-reliant communities from the county, census tract or block group boundaries. Therefore, the socioeconomic risk of an area may not represent the socioeconomic risk of individual homes or communities.

Physical monitoring and testing of state small water systems and individual domestic wells are needed to determine if those systems are unable to access safe drinking water. The State Water Board will continue to coordinate and support counties in their data collection, management, and sharing so that the Risk Assessment can improve its accuracy over time.

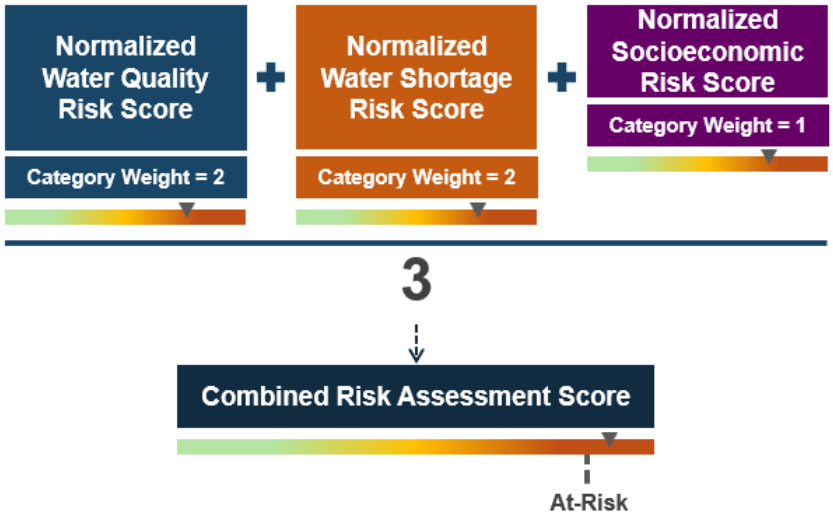
RISK ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The three risk categories (water quality, water shortage, and socioeconomic risk) are combined following a similar methodology as the Risk Assessment for public water systems. Data from each category is normalized into four scores (1, 0.25, 0, or unknown) based on thresholds. The final combined risk score is calculated per square mile section. The score is calculated by multiplying the normalized category scores by the category weights, adding the weighted scores for all three categories, and dividing by the number of categories with data. The final risk score is binned into three groups: "At-Risk," "Other" and "Not Assessed." Any

[96] Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool for Self-Supplied Communities
https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/ae1b4e3e41004f07b4901a7a3fa50637/

area that serves a state small water systems or a domestic well with a high score in two or more categories is always designated “At-Risk” (Figure 10).

Figure 10: Risk Assessment Methodology



The risk designation per square mile section is assigned to all state small water systems and domestic wells within that section. Location data for state small water systems were provided to the State Water Board through county reporting required through SB 200. Location data for domestic wells were sourced from the Online System for Well Completion Records[97] (managed by DWR) and consist of “domestic” type well records, excluding those drilled prior to 1977 and only including “New/Production or Monitoring/NA” completion record types. Combined risk scores are calculated for all areas of the state, but the Risk Assessment is only intended for areas with a state small water system or domestic well record. The online webtool includes a filter that only shows the risk scores for areas of the state with at least one domestic well or state small water system, although the data for all areas are available to download.

RISK ASSESSMENT RESULTS

To view the results of the state small water system and domestic well Risk Assessment, please refer to the online dashboard.[98] The dashboard display includes statewide summary statistics, results summarized by county, and filters that allow users to identify disadvantaged communities, nearby public water systems, and more. Table 22 shows the approximate counts

[97] Department of Water Resources OSWCR database https://services.arcgis.com/aa38u6OgfNoCkTJ6/arcgis/rest/services/i07_WellCompletionReports_Exported_v2_gdb/FeatureServer

[98] Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=ece2b3ca1f66401d9ae4bfce2e6a0403

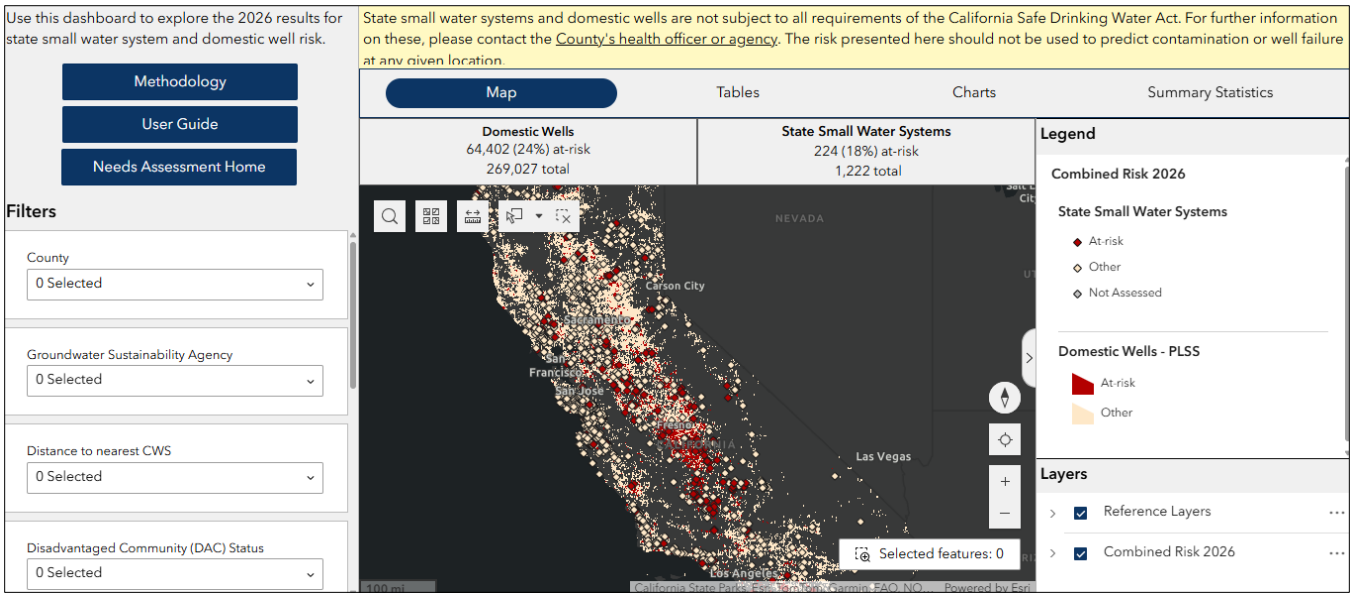
of state small water systems and domestic wells statewide located in different risk areas based on data from the 2026 Risk Assessment.

Table 22: State Small Water System and Domestic Well Results (Statewide)[99]

Systems	At-Risk	Other	Total
State Small Water Systems	224 (18%)	998 (82%)	1,222
Domestic Wells	64,402 (24%)	204,625 (76%)	269,027

Figure 11 is a map that shows the combined risk for areas of the state with a state small water system or domestic well. To view this spatial data in more detail, and to see the state small water system and domestic well risk counts summarized by county, please refer to the 2026 Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells.[100]

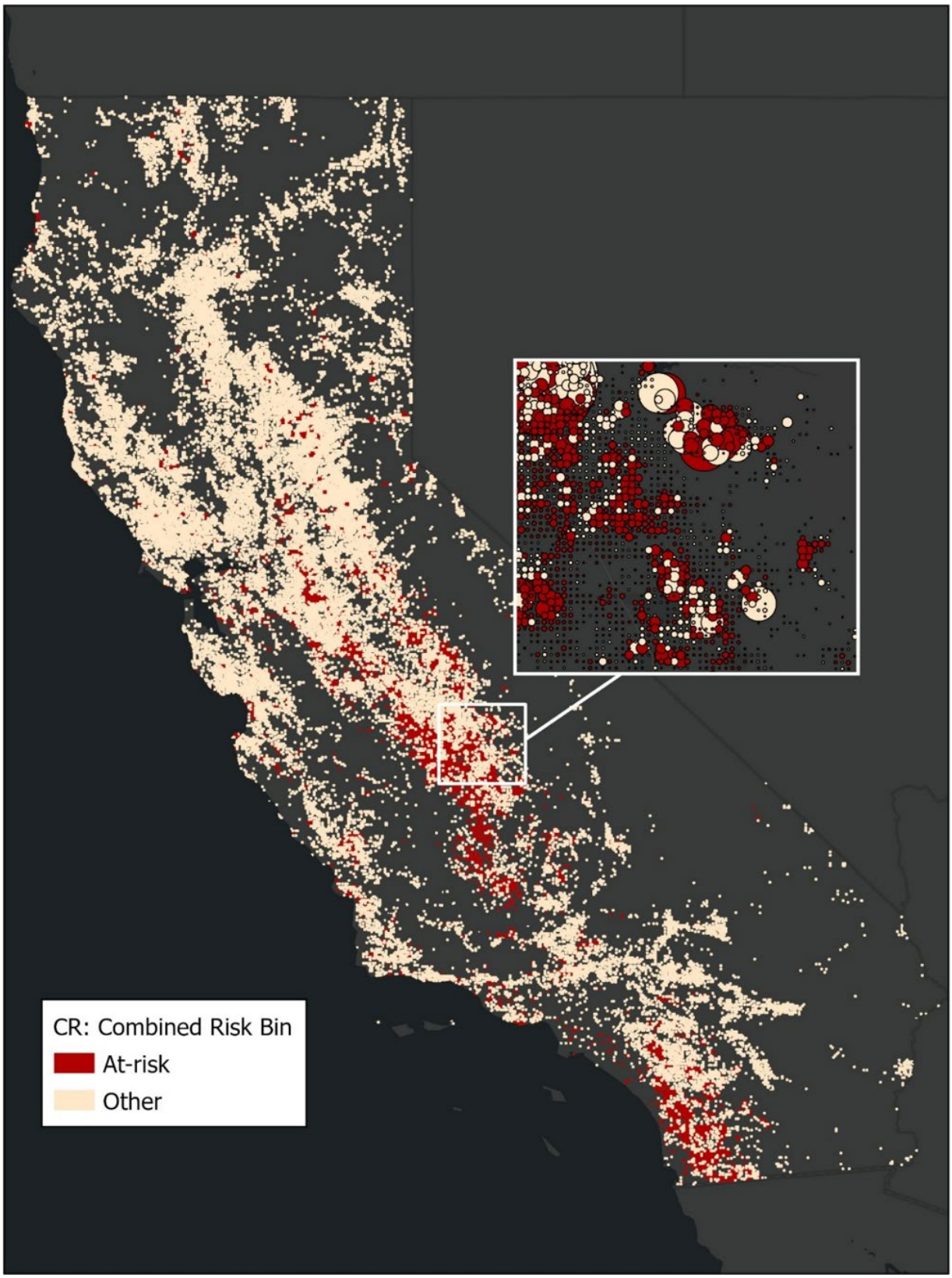
Figure 11: Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells



[99] For 2026 Risk Assessment, the drill date cutoff for domestic well records was changed from 1970 to 1977 to align with DWR. This means that domestic wells drilled between 1970 and 1977 are no longer included in the Risk Assessment, causing the total count of domestic well records to decrease from last year.

[100] Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=ece2b3ca1f66401d9ae4bfce2e6a0403

Figure 12: Combined Risk for State Small Water Systems & Domestic Wells



COMBINED RISK ANALYSIS

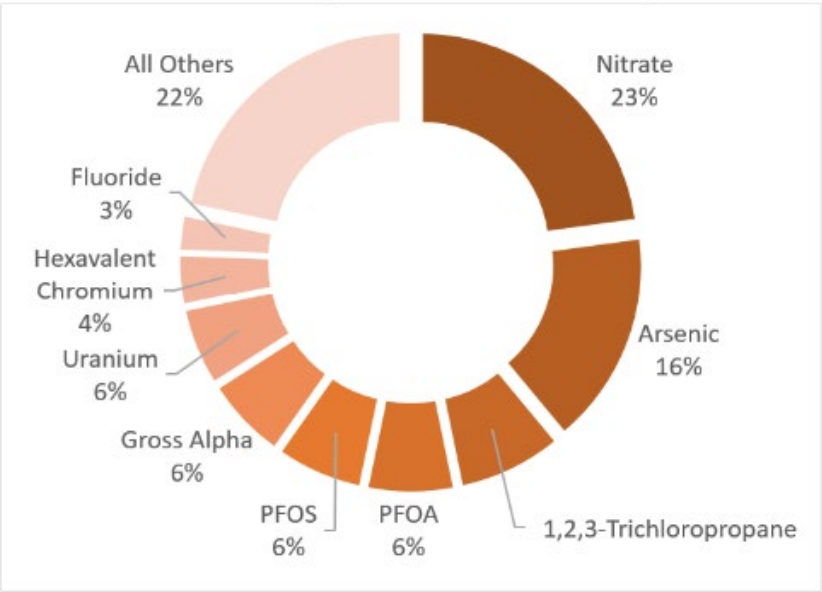
Areas with the highest combined risk scores are located in the Southern San Joaquin Valley, parts of the western Sierra Nevada foothills, and parts of San Diego County. The counties with the highest numbers of domestic wells in At-Risk areas are Fresno, San Diego, and Nevada counties. The counties with the highest number of state small water systems in At-Risk areas are Kern, Monterey, and Tulare counties.

To view the areas with the highest risk scores and see more information about these areas, including their distance to the nearest community water system and their disadvantaged community status, please refer to the Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells.[101]

WATER QUALITY RISK ANALYSIS

Statewide, the top contaminants that contributed to higher risk designations in domestic wells and state small water systems are nitrate, arsenic, 1,2,3-trichloropropane, gross alpha, and uranium, perfluorohexane sulfonic acid (PFHxS), perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), hexavalent chromium, and perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS). Figure 13 shows the proportion of domestic wells in high water quality risk areas where the contaminant may exceed drinking water standards. Note that multiple contaminants may exceed drinking water standards at a single location.

Figure 13: Constituents Contributing to Shallow Water Quality Risk



In 2026, the Risk Assessment began including two new contaminants – hexafluoropropylene oxide dimer acid (HFPO-DA or GenX) and perfluorononanoic acid (PFNA) and removed one contaminant – perfluorobutane sulfonic acid (PFBS). Additionally, the comparison

[101] Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=ece2b3ca1f66401d9ae4bfce2e6a0403

concentrations for all per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances is now the federal maximum contaminant level instead of the notification level.[102]

To investigate this further please use the water quality risk filter on the Risk Assessment - State Small Water Systems and Domestic Well Dashboard. Please navigate to the "Water Quality Risk" filter on the left-hand menu and select the desired risk status (ex. "high") from the dropdown menu. The map will automatically update to only display areas of high-water quality risk.

WATER SHORTAGE RISK ANALYSIS

The number of domestic wells in high water shortage risk areas decreased from 2025 to 2026. The methodology for DWR's Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool was updated during this time, including a data refresh and a change to the precision of the final risk scores. Results from DWR's 2026 Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool show decreased water shortage vulnerability scores in the Nevada County, El Dorado County, and Placer County areas in comparison to the scores from the 2024 DWR's assessment. These areas contain very high domestic well density, and the lowered water shortage vulnerability scores in these areas contributed to the decrease in the count of domestic wells in high water shortage risk areas.

High water shortage risk areas are highly correlated with reported dry wells. Of the dry well reports[103] made to the DWR within the past year, 87% are located within an area with high water shortage risk. 10% of reports are located within medium water shortage risk areas, and 3% of reports are located within low water shortage risk areas.

To investigate the areas of high-water shortage risk and the location of reported dry wells, please use the water shortage risk filter and the "Household Water Supply Shortage Reports" layer available on the Risk Assessment - State Small Water Systems and Domestic Well Dashboard.[104]

SOCIOECONOMIC RISK ANALYSIS

To investigate the areas of highest socioeconomic risk, please use the socioeconomic risk filter in the dashboard. For 2026, the source of the county-level socioeconomic indicators remained the 2022 county outreach spreadsheet collected by OEHHA. The source of the census tract and block group socioeconomic indicators was the most recently available American Community Survey 5-year estimates.

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[102] The water quality risk for the 2026 Needs Assessment was calculated in November 2025. At this time the federal guidelines included maximum contaminant levels for PFHxS, PFNA and HFPO-DA. On May 18, 2026 the US Environmental Protection Agency announced a proposed rule to rescind the maximum contaminant levels for PFHxS, PFNA, and HFPO-DA. The 2026 Needs Assessment still uses the maximum contaminant level as the regulatory threshold for these chemicals, following the guidelines in place at the time of the analysis. Future assessments will be updated to reflect changes to maximum contaminant levels.

[103] Households report well outages or issues to the Department of Water Resources through the Dry Well Reporting System: https://mydrywatersupply.water.ca.gov/report/.

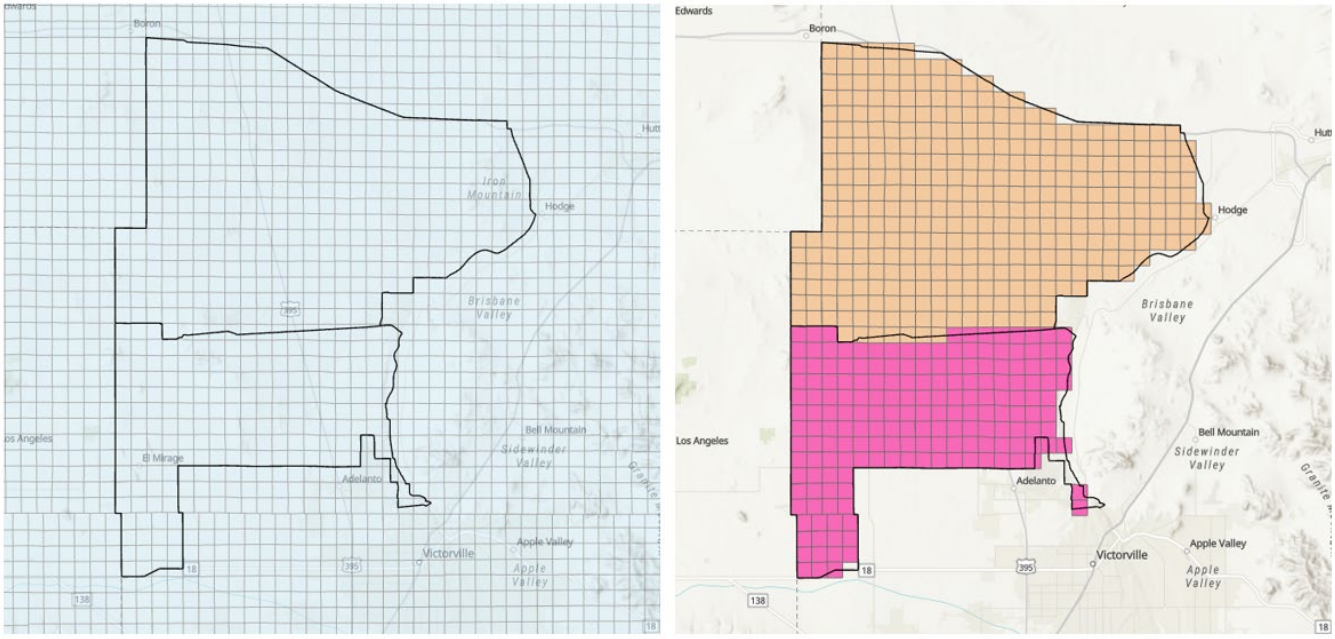
[104] Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems and Domestic Wells https://gispublic.waterboards.ca.gov/portal/apps/experiencebuilder/experience/?id=ece2b3ca1f66401d9ae4bfce2e6a0403

DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF AT-RISK STATE SMALL WATER SYSTEMS AND DOMESTIC WELL AREAS

Results for the 2026 Risk Assessment for state small water systems and domestic wells can be combined with demographic data to better understand the populations most at-risk for water shortage and water quality issues. However, there are several limitations to this demographic analysis. Demographic data is available at the census tract or block group-level, and current census surveys do not indicate household drinking water source information. Therefore, the demographic information presented in the tables below may not represent the actual population served by state small water systems or domestic wells. Any interpretation of these results should keep in mind the limitations of the analysis. Demographic data come from OEHHA's CalEnviroScreen 5.0[105] and the American Community Survey.[106] CalEnviroScreen 5.0 identifies California communities facing socioeconomic and health-related challenges and a high environmental burden. CalEnviroScreen combines a Population Characteristics Score, which captures social and health vulnerability, and a Pollution Burden Score, which captures exposure to environmental hazards and pollutants to assign each census tract in California. The overall score is calculated by multiplying the Population Characteristics and Pollution Burden Scores. The CalEnviroScreen 5.0 data is then displayed as percentiles, with higher percentiles indicating areas that are most affected by pollution and where people are especially vulnerable to the effects of pollution. Data for poverty, linguistic isolation (percentage of limited English-speaking households), household size, and race/ethnicity, as well as data used to calculated median household income and disadvantaged community status was taken from the most recently available 5-Year American Community Survey block group-level estimates.

[105] OEHHA CalEnviroScreen: https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen
[106] American Community Survey Data: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html

Figure 14: Public Land Survey System (PLSS) and Block Group Boundary Intersection by Section Centroid



The results of the demographic analysis are available as columns within the tabular data downloads available on the Needs Assessment homepage and the dashboard.[107] The demographic analysis for state small water systems was calculated by assigning census data to state small water systems using the census area overlying the point location of the state small water system. The demographic analysis for domestic wells was calculated by assigning census data to square mile sections using the census area overlying the section centroid, as represented in Figure 14.

[107] State Water Board I Drinking Water Needs Assessment
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/needs.html

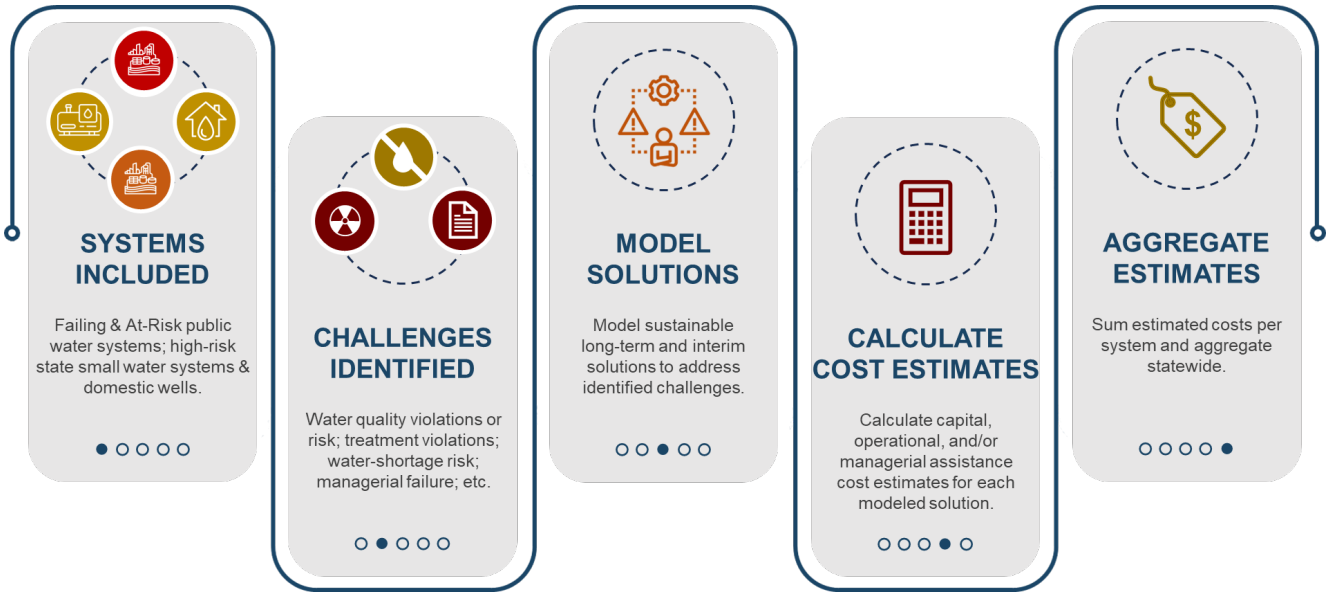
COST ASSESSMENT

OVERVIEW

The purpose of the Cost Assessment is to estimate the cost of achieving the Human Right to Water[108] in California. The Cost Assessment is a *model* comprised of decision criteria, cost assumptions, and calculation methodologies used to estimate a statewide cost for implementing long-term and interim solutions for Failing public water systems, At-Risk public water systems, high-risk state small water systems and domestic wells. The estimated costs and resulting Funding Gap Analysis are utilized to inform the broader demands of the SAFER program, including annual funding needs for the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (Figure 15).[109]

[108] State Water Resources Control Board Resolution No. 2016-0010
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/board_decisions/adopted_orders/resolutions/2016/rs2016_0010.pdf
[109] Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/sustainable_water_solutions/safer.html

Figure 15: Cost Assessment Model



The Cost Assessment results include the following:

- **Long-Term Solution Estimated Needs**: costs associated with installation of new infrastructure and managerial assistance.
- **Interim Assistance Estimated Needs**: costs associated with emergency assistance needs for disadvantaged communities.
- **Modeled Treatment Operations & Maintenance Needs**: costs related to ongoing needs associated with running modeled centralized and decentralized treatment.

PURPOSE OF THE COST ASSESSMENT

The purpose of the Cost Assessment is to estimate the cost of achieving the Human Right to Water, which is the cost of ensuring safe and affordable drinking water for all Californians. It is not a comprehensive assessment of statewide drinking water infrastructure needs. All drinking water systems require routine maintenance, infrastructure replacement, enhancements, *etc*. The Cost Assessment only includes a small proportion of drinking water systems in the state (*i.e.,* those necessary to achieve the Human Right to Water) and should not be interpreted as representing the full extent of drinking water funding needs.

The embedded assumptions and cost estimates detailed in the Cost Assessment are purely for the purposes of the Needs Assessment. Local solutions and actual costs will vary from system to system and will depend on site-specific details. Therefore, **the Cost Assessment is not intended to be used by the State Water Board or any community to inform community-level decisions,** as it includes many assumptions about local needs and capacity. The purpose of the Cost Assessment is to provide an informative analysis of estimated needs statewide.

The Cost Assessment evaluates only a narrow range of possible interim and long-term solutions. Communities included in the analysis should be conducting a detailed evaluation of their unique drinking water challenges and identify a range of possible solutions to select the best path forward.

The Cost Assessment is not used by the State Water Board or any of its partners to inform local decisions. In particular, the Cost Assessment's output and underlying assumptions are not used by the State Water Board to make decisions regarding funding and assistance.

In 2021, the State Water Board conducted its first Cost Assessment in partnership with the University of California Los Angeles Luskin Center for Innovation, Corona Environmental Consulting, and Sacramento State University Office of Water Programs. The results of that analysis were published in the 2021 Needs Assessment.[110] At that time, the Cost Assessment estimated that the total capital costs of addressing the challenges faced by Failing and At-Risk systems were approximately $4.5 billion for modeled long-term solutions and $1.6 billion for the estimated duration of modeled interim solutions.

[110] 2021 Drinking Water Needs Assessment https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2021_needs_assessment.pdf

Due to minor changes to the number of Failing and At-Risk systems in 2022, the State Water Board did not update the Cost Assessment estimates in the 2022 Needs Assessment. However, in September 2021 the Governor approved Senate Bill (SB) 552,[111] which requires small water systems (15 – 2,999 service connections) and schools to meet new drought infrastructure resiliency measures. In response to stakeholder feedback for better drought-related cost estimates and the need to support SB 552 planning, the State Water Board conducted a targeted Drought Infrastructure Cost Assessment for the 2022 Needs Assessment.[112] The 2022 Drought Infrastructure Cost Assessment estimated needs of approximately $2.4 billion for 2,634 small community water systems.

The 2023 Needs Assessment did not include an updated Cost Assessment. In 2023, the State Water Board embarked on a two-year Cost Assessment enhancement effort that included:

1. Updating how the Cost Assessment identifies and selects interim and long-term solutions for Failing and At-Risk systems.
2. Updating and enhancing the cost assumptions and formulas used in the Cost Assessment to estimate costs for both capital and non-capital.
3. Improving the analysis of the Cost Assessment results.
4. Improving transparency by making the underlying data, formulas, *etc.* more accessible.

The State Water Board hosted five public workshops to solicit stakeholder feedback on the 2024 Cost Assessment. More information about the Cost Assessment's enhancements can be found online.[113]

The 2024 Needs Assessment included an updated Cost Assessment results for Failing and At-Risk public water systems. The following points summarize the results:

1. Estimated long-term and interim cost needs for Failing and At-Risk public water systems in DACs only was approximately $3.7 billion, which was 69% of the total estimated need for Failing and At-Risk systems. The Cost Assessment estimated $1.75 billion for Failing DAC public systems and $1.97 billion for At-Risk DAC public water systems.
2. Total estimated cost for long-term solutions for all Failing and At-Risk public water systems was $4.9 billion. This was approximately $1.5 billion (44%) higher than the 2021 Cost Assessment results.
3. The total estimated cost for interim solutions for all Failing and At-Risk public water systems was $466 million. This was approximately $379 million (45%) lower than the 2021 Cost Assessment results.

The 2024 Cost Assessment also estimated the total long-term and interim cost needs for high-risk state small water systems and domestic wells to be approximately $4.9 billion.

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[111] Senate Bill No. 552, section 10609.62, Chapter 245
https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=202120220SB552
[112] 2022 Drinking Water Needs Assessment
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2022needsassessment.pdf
[113] State Water Board I Drinking Water Needs Assessment
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/needs.html

Due to minor changes to the number of Failing and At-Risk systems, the State Water Board did not update the Cost Assessment estimates in the 2025 and 2026 Needs Assessment.

FUNDING GAP ANALYSIS

OVERVIEW

In 2024, the State Water Board conducted a Cost Assessment to estimate the cost of implementing interim and long-term solutions for Failing or At-Risk public water systems, state small water systems, and domestic wells. The Funding Gap Analysis utilized the results of the 2024 Cost Assessment and estimated projected funding needs over the next 5-years within the 10-year appropriation of the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund (SADWF). The results of the analysis informed the annual funding plan for the SADWF as well as the broader demands on the State Water Board's drinking water funding programs. More information about the Gap Analysis can be found online.[114] The following is a summary of the results from the 2024 Gap Analysis:

1. The total State Water Board estimated 5-year capital and managerial assistance needs was approximately $11.5 billion for Failing public water systems, At-Risk public water systems, high-risk state small water systems, and high-risk domestic wells.
2. The Funding Gap Analysis estimated a cumulative 5-year grant funding gap of $5.5 billion for estimated capital and managerial assistance needs.
3. The Funding Gap Analysis indicated no projected loan/financing funding gap. All estimated 5-year loan-eligible capital needs are met by projected available loan capacity. The analysis estimated $758 million in unused loan capacity.
4. Estimated additional new grant-eligible needs were expected to exceed the amount of grant funds available in perpetuity.
5. The Funding Gap Analysis estimated that the projected needs of local cost share required was $13.9 billion.

Due to minor changes to the number of Failing and At-Risk systems, the State Water Board did not update the Cost Assessment estimates in the 2025 and 2026 Needs Assessment; therefore, no gap analysis has been conducted for these two years. Updated funding

[114] Appendix: Funding Gap Analysis Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2024/2024funding-gap-analysis-methodolgy.pdf

information for the SAFER Program is presented in the FY 2025-26 Fund Expenditure Plan (adopted on November 4, 2025, Resolution No. 2025-0034). [115] A new funding source that will be available starting fiscal year 2025–26, Proposition 4 was approved by California voters in November 2024 and authorizes $10 billion in bonds for environmental and climate resilience projects. Of this amount, approximately $1.9 billion is dedicated to improving drinking water quality and supply, particularly for underserved communities, through a multiyear allocation extending through fiscal year 2039–40.

[115] Fiscal Year 2025-26 Fund Expenditure Plan (FEP)
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/docs/2025/fy2025-26-fep-final-1125.pdf

AFFORDABILITY ASSESSMENT RESULTS

OVERVIEW

Ensuring that drinking water is affordable is crucial to meeting California's Human Right to Water mandate.[116] The COVID-related economic crisis magnified the need to address drinking water affordability for households and identify drinking water systems that require additional financial support to provide a safe and reliable drinking water supply.[117]

The purpose of the Affordability Assessment is to identify community water systems and non-transient non-community water systems serving K-12 schools that are disadvantaged and have instituted customer drinking water charges exceeding the "Affordability Threshold" established by the State Water Board. This assessment is required to ensure compliance with state and federal drinking water standards and helps inform the State Water Board's annual Fund Expenditure Plan.[118] However, the legislation does not define what the affordability threshold should be, nor is there specific guidance on how the State Water Board should evaluate affordability.

WHY MEASURING AFFORDABILITY MATTERS

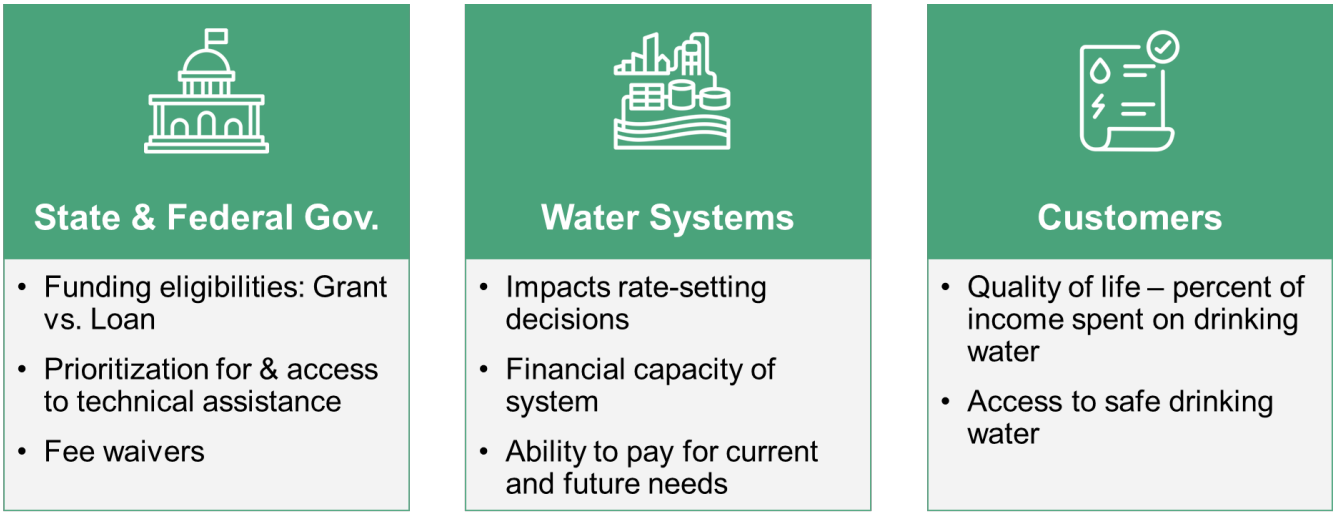
Drinking water affordability is difficult to measure. Different terms and metrics have been used to describe and measure affordability in the water sector and have been used to influence important decisions. For instance, affordability metrics are used to determine which water systems are eligible for state and federal assistance. Water systems meeting certain affordability thresholds qualify for more grants (as opposed to loan funding) for infrastructure projects and are frequently prioritized for state and federal technical assistance.

Affordability metrics are often used by water systems when exploring possible rate changes. Systems serving communities with affordability challenges often struggle to raise their rates,

[116] State Water Board Resolution No. 2016-0010
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/board_decisions/adopted_orders/resolutions/2016/rs2016_0010.pdf
[117] Drinking Water COVID-19 Financial Impacts Survey | California State Water Resources Control Board
https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/covid-19watersystemsurvey.html
[118] California Health and Safety Code, section 116769, subd. (a)(2)(B)

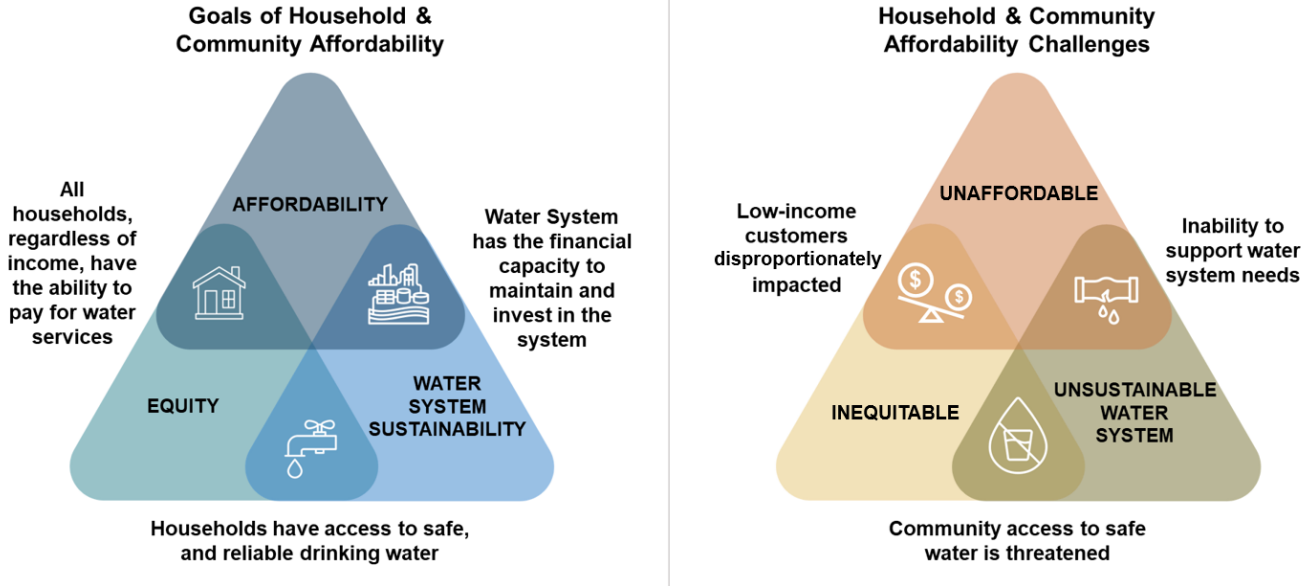
affecting their long-term financial capacity. Customers unable to pay for water services may experience challenges in accessing a reliable source of safe drinking water (Figure 16).

Figure 16: Why Measuring Affordability Matters



Assessing the affordability of drinking water services is essential because it sits at the intersection of equity and water system sustainability. Addressing affordability challenges is a critical step toward ensuring that all Californians have access to safe and reliable drinking water. Figure 17 illustrates this relationship and the potential consequences of inaction.

Figure 17: The Relationship Between Affordability, Equity and Water System Sustainability



DEFINING AFFORDABILITY

To better navigate the different metrics and approaches used to measure affordability, Figure 18 illustrates the nexus between types of affordability.

Figure 18: Nexus of Affordability Definitions

(1) Household Affordability: The ability of individual households to pay for an adequate supply of water. Metrics to measure household affordability are not included in either the Affordability Assessment or the Risk Assessment due to limited data availability.

(2) Community Affordability: The ability of households within a community to pay for water services with the effect of financially supporting a resilient water system. Metrics to measure community affordability are included in both the Affordability Assessment and Risk Assessment.

(3) & (4) Water System Financial Capacity: The ability of a water system to financially meet current and future operational and infrastructure needs in order to deliver safe drinking water. The financial capacity of water systems affects future rate increases, impacting households. A water system's inability to provide adequate services may require households served by the system to rely on expensive alternatives such as bottled water. Metrics measuring the financial capacity of water systems are included in the Risk Assessment only.

DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES & THE AFFORDABILITY ASSESSMENT

The purpose of the Affordability Assessment is to identify community water systems and non-transient non-community water systems serving K-12 schools that are disadvantaged and experiencing a high affordability burden. The State Water Board distinguishes two types of disadvantaged communities:

> **Disadvantaged Community (DAC):** the entire service area of a community water system, or a community therein, in which the median household income is less than 80% of the statewide annual median household income level.[119]

[119] Health & Saf. Code, § 116275, subd. (aa)

Severely Disadvantaged Community (**SDAC):** the categorization of an entire water system service area where the median household income is less than 60% of the statewide median household income.[120]

DAC status is determined by comparing a system's median household income (MHI) to California's statewide median income.[121] The methodology for deriving a system's MHI from American Community Survey data is described in Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology.[122]

DRINKING WATER CUSTOMER CHARGES

Measuring affordability includes an analysis of the ability of households and communities to pay for current and future water service charges. Because water systems can differ in how they bill customers (e.g., using different units, rate structures, or billing cycles), it is important to establish a standard basis for comparison. To ensure a consistent comparison of drinking water affordability, water rate charges are standardized to calculate the average monthly customer charge for the same volume of water use, 6 hundred cubic feet (HCF), across all systems. The State Water Board began requiring the submission of average monthly residential customer charges for 6 HCF of water used in the 2019 electronic Annual Report (eAR).[123]

AFFORDABILITY ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

WATER SYSTEMS ASSESSED

The Affordability Assessment is conducted annually for all community water systems and non-transient non-community water systems serving K-12 schools in California. Although there is some overlap, the Affordability Assessment includes some water systems that are not analyzed in the Risk Assessment. The Risk Assessment does not evaluate large community water systems with more than 30,000 service connections or serving a population greater than 100,000, and it does not include wholesalers that supply water to other water systems.

AFFORDABILITY ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

The Affordability Assessment methodology has developed through a phased public process since January 2019. Public workshops have been hosted to solicit public feedback to help refine the Assessment over time. The Affordability Assessment methodology relies on two core elements which are utilized to identify water systems serving communities that may be experiencing drinking water affordability challenges:

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[120] Water Code § 13476, subd. (j)

[121] Based on most recent ACS 5-Year estimates from U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts: California: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/CA/INC110222.

[122] Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026mhi-calculation.pdf

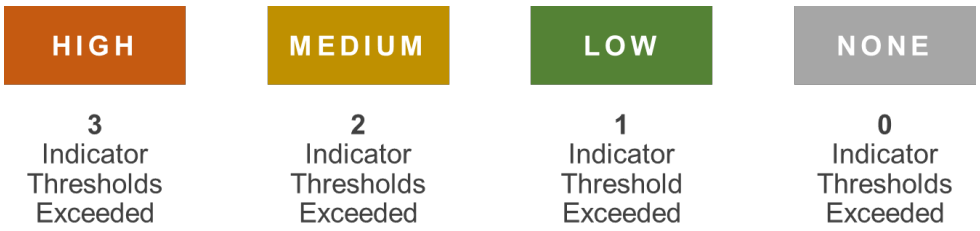
[123] Electronic Annual Report I State Water Board https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/ear.html

Affordability Indicators: quantifiable measurements of key data points that allow the State Water Board to assess drinking water affordability challenges.

Affordability Indicator Thresholds: the levels, points, or values associated with an individual affordability indicator that delineate when a water system's customers may be experiencing affordability challenges.

The Affordability Assessment identifies "High," "Medium," and "Low" Affordability Burden communities, and water systems with no Affordability Burden ("None"). The designation is based on the number of affordability indicator thresholds met by each water system. The higher the count, the higher the affordability burden designation (Figure 19). See Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology[124] for more information.

Figure 19: Illustration of the Affordability Assessment Methodology



No changes have been made to the Affordability Assessment methodology since 2023. The underlying data used to conduct the Affordability Assessment has been refreshed with the most recent and available data. For more details on the data and methods used to calculate, see Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology.[125]

AFFORDABILITY INDICATORS

In 2020, 23 potential affordability indicators were identified and evaluated through public workshops for inclusion in both the Affordability Assessment and Risk Assessment.[126] Through multiple public workshops, stakeholders identified a series of indicators that could be incorporated into the Affordability Assessment immediately and some that needed to be further developed and refined. Since 2020, the State Water Board and its partners have hosted workshops to further refine and update the indicators used in the Affordability Assessment as data availability changes. Affordability indicators can be categorized based on the following attributes:

[124] Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026affordabilityassessment-methodology.pdf

[125] Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026affordabilityassessment-methodology.pdf

[126] Supplemental Appendix: Potential Affordability Risk Indicator Evaluations https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/docs/safer_supp_appxd3_101320.pdf

Household vs. Community Affordability Indicators:

- **Household** Affordability Indicators measure the ability of individual households to pay for an adequate supply of water. Indicators measuring affordability at this scale often include a count or measurement of the number of customers within a service area of a water system that may be struggling now or in the future to pay for water services. *Currently, the Affordability Assessment has no household Affordability Indicators.*
- **Community** Affordability Indicators measure the ability of a water system's entire service area to pay for water services to financially support a resilient water system. Metrics measuring community level affordability often include data that spans all customers served by the water system.

Although there may be some households struggling to pay for water services, overall community-level affordability may not be a challenge if the community on average is not struggling. The State Water Board recognizes the importance of considering household and community affordability together, however, there is currently insufficient statewide data to include household affordability indicators in the Affordability Assessment.

Water Rate-Based vs. Socioeconomic-Based Affordability Indicators:

- **Water rates-based** Affordability Indicators rely on data that is either directly or indirectly related to a water system charging customers for water. Water rates-based indicators typically assess the proportion of a customer's income spent on water services or non-payment of water bills.
- **Non-rates-based** Affordability Indicators do not rely on a water system directly charging their customers for water services. These indicators may include income-based data or other data points that can assess the ability to access drinking water services. These types of indicators are important for measuring affordability challenges for customers who do not receive a water bill. Examples include mobile home park residents who pay for water services in their rent.

The following are brief descriptions of the affordability indicators utilized in the 2026 Affordability Assessment. Additional details on data sources, calculation methodologies, and thresholds are detailed in Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology.[127]

Percentage of Median Household Income (% MHI):
This indicator measures the annual average residential customer charges for 6 hundred cubic feet (HCF) per month for each water system relative to the annual median household income of the service area. 6 HCF (4,488 gallons) of indoor water usage per month is roughly equivalent to 50 gallons per person per day for a three-person household for 30 days. In other words, this indicator compares the average customer's yearly expenses for water with their estimated yearly median household income.

% MHI is commonly used by state and federal regulatory agencies and by water industry stakeholders for assessing community-wide water charge affordability for decades. The State

[127] Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026affordabilityassessment-methodology.pdf

Water Board uses median household income to determine disadvantaged community status and has for some time used the 1.5% MHI threshold by the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund (DWSRF) program as a metric for determining whether a small disadvantaged community water system will receive repayable (e.g., loan) or non-repayable (e.g., grant) funding.

Extreme Water Bill:
This indicator identifies water systems with drinking water customer charges that meet or exceed 150% of statewide average drinking water customer charges for 6 HCF of water consumption per month.

Household Socioeconomic Burden:
This indicator identifies water systems that serve communities experiencing both high poverty rates and high housing costs for low-income households. These communities may already struggle to afford their current water bills with limited disposable income constrained by high housing costs and could face additional hardship if customer charge increases in the future. This indicator is a composite indicator of two data points: Poverty Prevalence and Housing Burden.

- **Poverty Prevalence** measures the percentage of the population with incomes less than two times the federal poverty level.[128] The data used to calculate this indicator come from the American Community Survey most recently available 5-Year Block Group-Level estimates.[129]
- **Housing Burden Indicator** measures the percentage of households in a census tract that are both low income (making less than 80% of the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Area Median Family Income) and severely burdened by housing costs (paying greater than 50% of their income to housing costs). The data used to calculate this indicator come from the HUD Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) most recently available Census Tract 5-Year Estimates.[130]

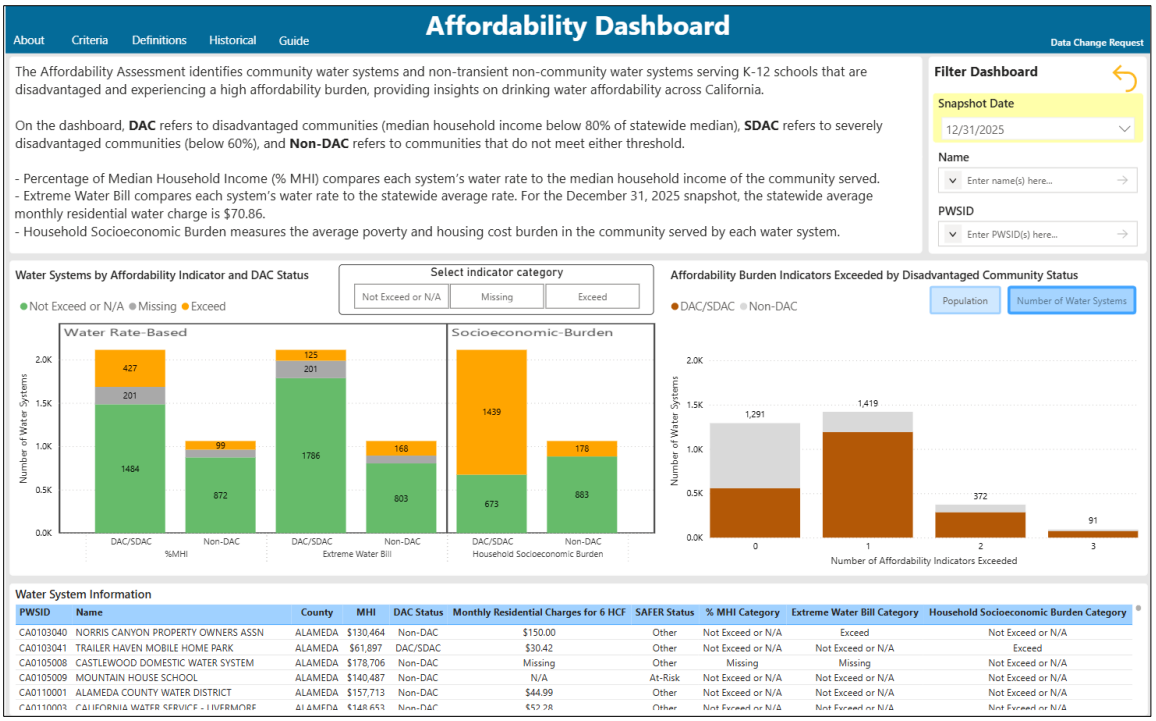
AFFORDABILITY ASSESSMENT RESULTS

The results of the Affordability Assessment are accessible online through the State Water Board's Affordability Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems.[131] The Median Household Income (MHI) methodology used in the Affordability Assessment has been updated and the updated MHI values are used in the Affordability Assessment beginning in June 2026. The Affordability Assessment Dashboard (Figure 20) provides an overview of the affordability

[128] The federal poverty level used to assess poverty varies by family size and composition, and in some cases age. How the Census Bureau Measures Poverty: https://www.census.gov/topics/income-poverty/poverty/guidance/poverty-measures.html
[129] Census Bureau data table C17002 (Block Group-level): Ratio of Income to Poverty Level in the Past 12 Months, from most recently available American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html.
[130] Most recently available census tract-level estimates from HUD Office of Policy Development and Research Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy (CHAS) data: https://www.huduser.gov/portal/.
[131] Affordability Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems https://app.powerbigov.us/view?r=eyJrIjoiMGIyOWU3OTctNGZjNy00MDU2LTkwMmQtOGI5NjcxZDgyN2ZiIiwidCI6ImZlMTg2YTI1LTdkNDktNDFlNi05OTQxLTA1ZDIyODFkMzZjMSJ9

burden experienced by community water systems and non-transient non-community water systems serving K-12 schools across California. A message displayed at the top of the dashboard describes the Affordability Assessment and the affordability indicators used to evaluate community affordability burden. The dashboard displays the number of water systems – or total population served, using a toggle feature – exceeding each affordability indicator. Additional visualizations summarize the total number of affordability indicators exceeded by each water system, representing overall affordability burden. A filterable data table allows users to view individual water system records, including median household income (MHI), disadvantaged community (DAC) status, monthly drinking water charge, SAFER status, and affordability indicator results. Reference buttons on the top left corner for About, Criteria, Definitions, Historical, and Guide provide additional context on terminology, methodology and using the dashboard. The dashboard updates the Affordability Assessment results bi-annually.

Figure 20: Affordability Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems



DEMOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF WATER SYSTEMS WITH HIGH AFFORDABILITY BURDEN

Results for the Affordability Assessment for community water systems and non-transient non-community systems serving K-12 schools can be combined with demographic data to better understand the populations most at-risk. However, there are several limitations to this demographic analysis. Demographic data is collected at the census tract or block group-level, and current census surveys do not indicate household drinking water source information. Therefore, the demographic information presented in the table below (Table 23) may not

represent the actual population served by water systems. Any interpretation of these results should keep in mind the limitations of the analysis.

Demographic data come from the Draft CalEnviroScreen 5.0 and the American Community Survey. CalEnviroScreen 5.0 identifies California communities facing socioeconomic and health-related challenges and a high environmental burden. CalEnviroScreen combines a Population Characteristics Score, which captures social and health vulnerability, and a Pollution Burden Score, which captures exposure to environmental hazards and pollutants to assign each census tract in California an overall cumulative impact score. The Population Characteristics and Pollution Burden Scores both range from 0 to 10, with scores of 10 indicating the highest vulnerability to environmental hazards and socioeconomic or health challenges, respectively.[132] The overall score is calculated by multiplying the Population Characteristics and Pollution Burden Scores, where 100 indicates the most vulnerable. Data for poverty, linguistic isolation (percentage of limited English-speaking households), household size, and race/ethnicity, as well as data used to calculated median household income and disadvantaged community status was taken from the most recently available 5-Year American Community Survey estimates.[133] The socioeconomic analysis was calculated using water service area boundaries and census tract or block group boundaries to determine area-weighted averages for most demographic indicators.[134] Median household income and disadvantaged community status were calculated using a separate methodology described in the Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology.[135] Therefore, this methodology may be biased towards demographic data from larger census tracts and block groups that are less populated and more rural.

Table 23 summarizes the findings of the demographic analysis for water systems assessed by the Affordability Assessment. When compared with non-disadvantaged community water systems, DAC/SDAC water system service areas tend to have higher CalEnviroScreen scores, a higher percentage of the population in poverty, and a higher percentage of limited English-speaking households. Systems that serve disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities are also more likely to be serving majority communities of color. Water systems

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[132] Population Characteristics for each census tract are derived from the average percentiles for 3 sensitive populations indicators (asthma, cardiovascular disease, and low birth weight) and 5 socioeconomic factors indicators (educational attainment, housing-burdened low-income households, linguistic isolation, poverty, and unemployment). The Pollution Burden score for each census tract combines 7 pollution exposure indicators (ozone/PM2.5 concentrations, diesel particulate matter emissions, drinking water contaminants, children's lead risk from housing, pesticide use, toxic releases from facilities, and traffic density) and 5 environmental effects indicators (cleanup sites, impaired water bodies, groundwater threats, hazardous waste facilities and generators, and solid waste sites and facilities). The score ranges from 0.1-10 with 10 being the most pollution burden. The average population characteristics and pollution burden score for each water system is calculated as the area-weighted average of census tract-level scores. More information on CalEnviroscreen can be found at OEHHA CalEnviroScreen: https://oehha.ca.gov/calenviroscreen.

[133] American Community Survey Data: https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/data.html

[134] More information on the area-weighted methodology can be found in the Appendix: GIS Methodology for Calculating Data: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/general-gis-methodology.pdf.

[135] Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/documents/needs/2026/2026mhi-calculation.pdf

with high or medium affordability burden do not have higher CalEnviroScreen scores, poverty levels, linguistic isolation, average household size, or serve relatively more communities of color when compared to low affordability burden systems, but this is partially because there are many more systems experiencing low burden (compared to medium or high). However, compared to systems with no burden, those with high affordability burden do tend to have higher CalEnviroScreen scores, a higher percentage of population in poverty, a higher percentage of limited English-speaking households, and more likely to be serving majority communities of color.

Table 23: Demographic Analysis for Water Systems with Different Levels of Affordability Burden and DAC Status

Community Characteristics	Statewide (all CWS + K-12)	Non-DAC/SDAC	DAC/SDAC	No Afford. Burden	Low Afford. Burden	Medium Afford. Burden	High Afford. Burden
Total Count of Systems	**3,176**[136]	**1,061**	**2,112**	**1,293**	**1,420**	**372**	**91**
Average CalEnviroScreen 5.0 Score (Out of 100, w/ 100 indicating highest burden)	25.3	18.4	28.8	19.4	30.8	25.0	25.1
Average CalEnviroScreen 5.0 Population Characteristics Score (Out of 10, w/ 10 being most vulnerable)	5.04	3.72	5.71	4.12	5.78	5.38	5.20
Average CalEnviroScreen 5.0 Pollution Burden Score (Out of 10, with 10 being most pollution burden)	4.81	4.71	4.85	4.57	5.13	4.46	4.54
Average percentage of the population living below twice the federal poverty level	29.5%	16.1%	36.2%	17.1%	38.9%	34.5%	37.1%
Average percentage of households with	5.4%	3.8%	6.3%	3.3%	7.7%	4.6%	3.8%

[136] 3 systems lacked enough data to determine DAC status.

Community Characteristics	Statewide (all CWS + K-12)	Non-DAC/SDAC	DAC/SDAC	No Afford. Burden	Low Afford. Burden	Medium Afford. Burden	High Afford. Burden
limited English speaking (linguistically isolated)							
Average household size[137]	2.8	2.8	2.7	2.7	2.9	2.6	2.6
Percentage serving majority communities of color	46.0%	47.6%	42.9%	39.4%	53.6%	40.1%	45.7%

[137] Block groups that had 0 households (145 out of 25,607 total block groups) were not included in the average.

TRIBAL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

BACKGROUND

According to data managed by the U.S. EPA for federally recognized tribes, there are approximately 148 tribal water systems in California, comprising 112 tribal community water systems, 23 non-transient non-community water systems, and 13 transient water systems regulated by the U.S. EPA. These water systems may be owned and operated by the tribe or managed by non-tribal members or the federal government. (*e.g.*, Bureau of Indian Affairs and U.S. Customs and Border Protection).

There are 49 federally recognized tribes in California that do not have water systems regulated by U.S. EPA because they do not meet the federal definition of a public water system. For these 49 tribes, drinking water may be accessed through 1) domestic wells that serve fewer than 15 service connections or 25 people, 2) decentralized surface water diversions, or 3) public water systems that are located outside of tribal land and are thus regulated by the State Water Board.

Tribal communities that rely on domestic wells that serve fewer than 15 connections or 25 people are faced with similar challenges experienced by well owners throughout California including drought related supply issues, lack of regular water quality testing, water quality health impacts, and operation and maintenance issues. There is very limited federal technical assistance funding available to support solutions for domestic wells on or off tribal land. More information is required to better understand the unique needs of these 49 tribes. Engagement with these tribes will be ongoing.

Tribal communities may also be served by public or privately owned water systems over which they have limited or no influence or control. These water systems, not located on federal lands, are regulated by entities other than U.S. EPA, such as the State Water Board or California Public Utilities Commission. At times, tribal members may serve on the boards of these water systems. Oftentimes, these public water systems provide drinking water to predominantly tribal households but are not governed by the local tribal government and do not include direct representation of tribal members on their board.

FAILING EQUIVALENT TRIBAL WATER SYSTEMS

Since the State Water Board does not regulate tribal water systems, staff worked with U.S. EPA to apply the Needs Assessment's Failing Criteria to the 148 tribal water systems that U.S. EPA regulates to develop a Failing-equivalent list of those tribal water systems. It is important to note that in comparison to the federal government, California has stricter criteria for maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) and an expanded list of contaminants that are monitored, such as 1,2,3-trichloropropane (1,2,3-TCP). For the purposes of this assessment, the results of U.S. EPA's assessment below utilize the federal government's list of contaminants and MCLs. Therefore, it is expected that there may also be tribal water systems that are not currently meeting California-specific MCLs that are not captured in this list. Additionally, due to the lack of available data, the scope of this Failing-equivalent analysis is limited to only tribal water systems U.S. EPA regulates and that are located on federal lands. Table 24 summarizes the Failing criteria for public water systems used by the U.S. EPA to identify Failing-equivalent tribal water systems that meet the criteria outlined in this table.

Table 24: Criteria for Failing Public Water Systems

Criteria
Primary MCL Violation with an open Enforcement Action
Secondary MCL Violation with an open Enforcement Action
***E. coli* Violation with an open Enforcement Action**
Treatment Technique Violations: • One or more Treatment Technique violations (in lieu of an MCL), related to a primary contaminant, with an open enforcement action; and/or • Three or more Treatment Technique violations (in lieu of an MCL), related to a primary contaminant, within the last three years.
Monitoring and Reporting Violations: • Three Monitoring and Reporting violations (related to an MCL) within the last three years where at least one violation has been open for 15 months or greater.
Source Capacity Violation with an open Enforcement Action

Results of tribal drinking water assessment were:

Of the 148 tribal water systems, 37 tribal community water systems met the criteria for a Failing-equivalent water system (Table 25).

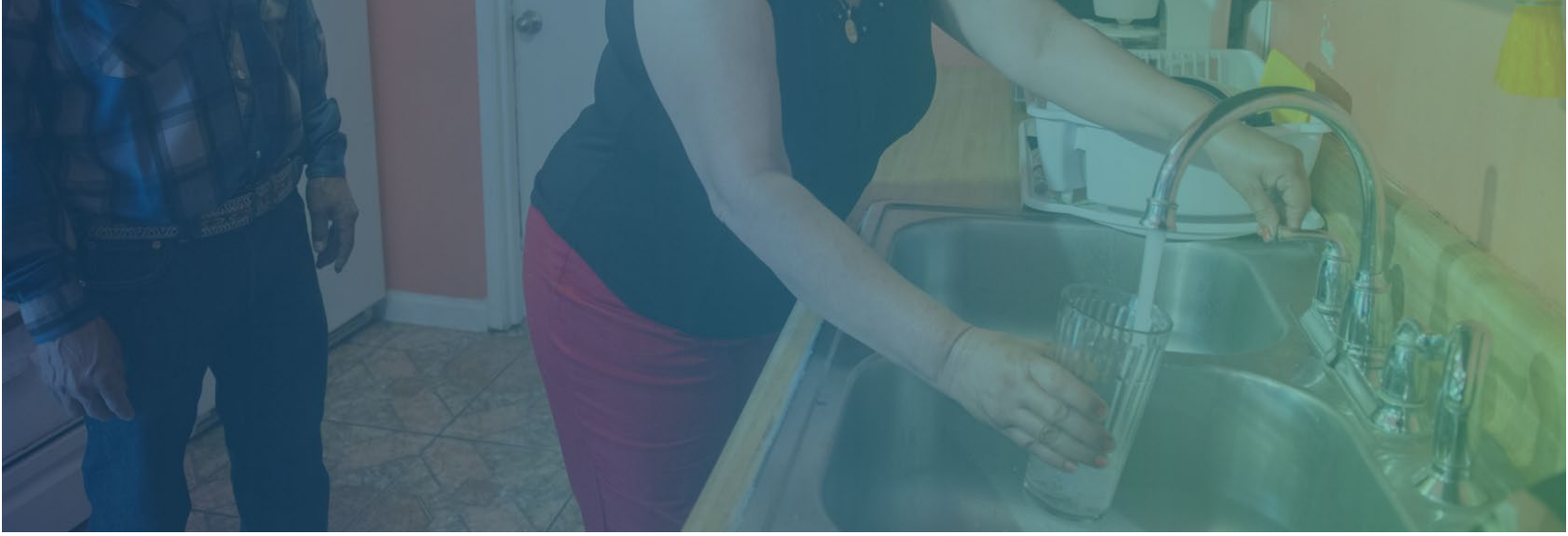
Table 25: Tribal Failing-Equivalent Water Systems Results[138]

Tribal Water System	Population	No. of Connections	Primary MCL Violation	Treatment Technique Violation	Monitoring & Reporting Violations	Notes on Current Funding/Solution
1	1,530	13	No	No	Yes	No information available
2	600	193	No	Yes	No	No information available
3	408	62	No	Yes	No	No information available
4	4,400	603	No	No	Yes	No information available
5	361	221	Yes, for Total trihalomethanes	Yes	Yes	No information available
6	35	7	No	Yes	Yes	No information available
7	3,550	905	No	Yes	Yes	Has current Technical Assistance provider through U.S. EPA but will require funding for long-term solutions
8	409	115	No	Yes	Yes	Currently working with Indian Health Service with U.S. EPA funding
9	84	30	No	Yes	Yes	Currently working with Indian Health Service with U.S. EPA funding
10	850	62	No	No	Yes	No information available
11	150	58	No	Yes	Yes	Currently working with Indian Health Service and U.S. EPA for funding
12	153	20	No	Yes	No	SAFER funding could not apply to needs
13	487	48	No	Yes	No	In need of certified operator
14	90	18	No	No	Yes	No information available
15	61	24	No	No	Yes	No information available

[138] Certain Failing criteria were not assessed due to data availability constraints (secondary MCL and Source Capacity); Additionally, no systems were identified as having E. coli contamination violations during this reporting period.

Tribal Water System	Population	No. of Connections	Primary MCL Violation	Treatment Technique Violation	Monitoring & Reporting Violations	Notes on Current Funding/Solution
16	5,660	1201	No	Yes	Yes	Currently working with U.S. EPA to return to compliance
17	152	33	No	Yes	No	In need of certified operator
18	70	24	No	No	Yes	No information available
19	1,000	251	No	No	Yes	No information available
20	220	54	No	No	Yes	No information available
21	68	16	No	Yes	Yes	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
22	41	9	No	No	Yes	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
23	38	8	No	No	Yes	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
24	30	13	No	Yes	No	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
25	30	13	No	No	Yes	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
26	1,350	352	No	Yes	No	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
27	35	13	No	Yes	Yes	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system
28	300	76	No	Yes	No	Large scale consolidation w/ nearby public water system

Tribal Water System	Population	No. of Connections	Primary MCL Violation	Treatment Technique Violation	Monitoring & Reporting Violations	Notes on Current Funding/Solution
29	2,560	330	No	Yes	Yes	Receiving funding and technical assistance from SAFER Program; Planning completed in 2025, Construction funding application pending in 2026
30	222	45	Yes-Arsenic	Yes	No	Currently receiving O&M Assistance from SAFER Program for interim solution; Indian Health Service funding new wells & tanks for permanent solutions
31	2,015	14	No	No	Yes	No information available
32	12,800	56	No	No	Yes	No information available
33	96	15	No	Yes	No	No information available
34	30	8	No	Yes	No	No information available
35	120	25	No	Yes	No	No information available
36	215	38	No	No	Yes	No information available
37	300	160	No	No	Yes	No information available
Total	**40,520**	**5,133**	**2**	**22**	**25**	16 systems receiving support, 21 systems with no current solution in progress



CONCLUSIONS

NEEDS ASSESSMENT NEXT STEPS

The State Water Board conducts the Needs Assessment to support implementation of the SAFER program. The results of the Needs Assessment are used to:

- prioritize public water systems, tribal water systems, state small water systems, and domestic wells for funding in each year's Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund Expenditure Plan;
- inform State Water Board technical assistance;
- develop strategies for implementing interim and long-term solutions; and
- targeted outreach on engagement and partnership activities.

The Needs Assessment methodology will be refined over time to incorporate additional and better-quality data, experience gained from implementing the SAFER program, and further input from the public and SAFER Advisory Group.

WATER SYSTEM REQUESTS FOR DATA UPDATES

The State Water Board is accepting inquiries related to underlying data change requests for the Needs Assessment. The data used for both the Risk and Affordability Assessments are drawn from multiple sources and are detailed in the Appendices (see links at end of document). Water systems are encouraged to reach out via the online webform below:

Water System Data Change Request Webform: https://forms.office.com/g/eaJHipW8gF. As new data become available, the State Water Board will update the Needs Assessment results. Therefore, the list of water systems designated as Failing, At-Risk, or Other will evolve over time from the aggregated assessment results summarized in this report.

2026-27 SAFE AND AFFORDABLE DRINKING WATER FUND EXPENDITURE PLAN

The results of the 2026 Needs Assessment will be utilized by the State Water Board and SAFER Advisory Group[139] to inform the prioritization of funding and technical assistance within the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund Expenditure Plan.[41] The SAFER Advisory Group is composed of up to 20 appointed members that represent public water systems, technical assistance providers, local agencies, nongovernmental organizations, California Native American tribes, the public and residents served by community water systems in disadvantaged communities, state small water systems, and domestic wells.

The SAFER Advisory Group meets at least four times a year to provide opportunities for public and community input, utilizing the Needs Assessment to inform the Fund Expenditure Plan.

[139] SAFER Advisory Group: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/safer/advisory_group.html

APPENDICES, ATTACHMENTS, AND DASHBOARDS

SAFER Program Progress & Updates

- Appendix: New Legislation Related to the SAFER Program and Capacity Development Strategy

Failing Water Systems

- Appendix: Failing Water System Criteria
- Attachment: Failing Systems (2017 –2025)

Risk Assessment for Public Water Systems

- Appendix: Risk Assessment Methodology for Public Water Systems
- Attachment: Risk Assessment Results Spreadsheet

Risk Assessment for State Small Water Systems & Domestic Wells

- Appendix: Risk Assessment Methodology for State Small Water Systems & Domestic Wells
- Attachment: State Small Water Systems At-Risk List
- Attachment: Domestic Wells At-Risk List

Cost Assessment & Funding Gap Analysis

- Appendix: 2024 Cost Assessment Results
- Appendix: Cost Assessment Methodology
    - Supplemental Appendix: Cost Assessment Physical Consolidation Methodology
    - Supplemental Appendix: Cost Assessment Centralized Treatment Methodology
    - Supplemental Appendix: Cost Assessment Decentralized Treatment Methodology
    - Supplemental Appendix: Cost Assessment Additional Long-Term Solutions Methodology
    - Supplemental Appendix: Cost Assessment Interim Solutions Methodology
- Appendix: Funding Gap Analysis Methodology

Affordability Assessment

- Appendix: Affordability Assessment Methodology
- Appendix: Median Household Income (MHI) and Economic Status Determination Methodology
- Attachment: Affordability Assessment Results Spreadsheet

Additional Appendices

- Appendix: GIS Methodology for Calculating Data
- Appendix: New Public Water Systems 3-Years
- SAFER Data.ca.gov Published Data

Dashboards

- Failing Water System Dashboard
- Risk Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems

- Risk Assessment Dashboard for State Small Water Systems & Domestic Wells
- Affordability Assessment Dashboard for Public Water Systems