



Media Release

Report offers first in-depth picture of California water systems struggling to provide safe drinking water

Assessment will inform upcoming funding priorities

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SACRAMENTO – The State Water Resources Control Board announced today the completion of its first-ever comprehensive look at California water systems that are struggling to provide safe drinking water to communities and how to help them. With criteria for the state’s [Human Right to Water](#) list recently expanded, the assessment identifies both failing water systems and those at risk of failing, offering the most in-depth view of long-term drinking water safety the state has ever had.

The [needs assessment](#) follows California’s leadership in adopting the first Human Right to Water policy in the nation. The study is part of the state’s Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Program, a comprehensive approach to implementing Governor Gavin Newsom’s commitment to ensuring the estimated 1 million Californians being served contaminated water have solutions for safe, affordable drinking water. The Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund earmarks \$130 million annually through 2030. Additional funds to address SAFER solutions come from various State and Federal funding sources.

The needs assessment does three things: (1) identifies California small water systems and domestic wells that are failing or at risk of failing to provide access to safe drinking water; (2) estimates the cost of interim and long-term solutions for these systems; and (3) determines the statewide funding gap and affordability challenges that may be barriers to implementing these solutions.

While the Water Board estimates another \$4.6 billion in drinking water grants and loans will be needed to help water systems implement sustainable, long-term solutions, the Biden Administration’s recently announced \$2 trillion infrastructure initiative devotes significant resources to new or upgraded water projects and could help close many financing gaps in the years ahead.

“While systems not currently meeting drinking water standards are our top priority, we know out-of-compliance systems exist that are just one drought or pump failure or contaminant detection away from serving unsafe water,” said Board Chair E. Joaquin Esquivel. “In collaboration with federal, local and tribal government partners, as well as



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the private sector, this assessment will help develop solutions that ensure universal access to clean and safe drinking water in California.”

Details of the needs assessment were shared with the all-volunteer SAFER Advisory Group at its quarterly meeting Thursday, and members were asked to provide input to help establish funding priorities for this year.

The criteria for systems on the Human Right to Water list were expanded in April 2021. This change was necessary to ensure that broader issues, such as treatment and critical monitoring violations, were being addressed in addition to chemical violations. The risk assessment was developed in partnership with University of California, Los Angeles and refined through stakeholder input. The assessment seeks to make inroads in three major ways:

- Identify communities with water systems that are failing and provide early warning for those at risk of failing
- Estimate the cost of temporary and long-term solutions for those communities
- Determine the statewide funding gap and affordability challenges that may be barriers to finding a solution.

Each year, approximately 45 new water systems are added to the HR2W list, but the overall number of HR2W systems is fairly constant because, as some come into compliance, others begin to fail. This demonstrates that to truly make statewide progress, it is critical to identify and support at-risk systems before they fail.

“We want these systems to return to compliance, and to plug the pipeline of failing systems, but to do so will require sustained investment in water systems suffering from decades of accumulated need,” said Esquivel. “Aging infrastructure, climate change, droughts, floods, economic downturns, and emerging contaminants of concern will continue to stress our water systems. We must better understand how to prepare communities to be more resilient, especially our smaller, disadvantaged and underserved communities. This assessment is our first snapshot in what will be a comprehensive and ongoing effort.”

Of the 7,800 public water systems in California, there are about 345 systems on the Human Right to Water List, meaning they don’t meet safe drinking water standards. Currently, 92 percent of those systems are actively working toward long-term solutions and 40 percent are looking at the feasibility of consolidating with another nearby water system.

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