



Media Release

Board provides \$152,000 to ensure safe drinking water for Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe in Mono County

Funding secures interim solution while federal project is developed

Water Board has provided nearly \$918,000 for drinking water projects in 13 tribal communities since 2019

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SACRAMENTO – Working with federal partners, the State Water Resources Control Board has committed more than \$152,000 from California’s [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience \(SAFER\)](#) drinking water program to support operational assistance and an interim solution for the Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe in Mono County to address elevated arsenic in wells on the Benton Reservation.

The SAFER funding will ensure the Tribe has access to safe and affordable drinking water while a long-term solution is developed through a well-drilling and treatment project lead by the Indian Health Service (IHS) with possible additional funding from federal partners.

“We know that sustainable drinking water solutions require strong collaboration and partnership, which the Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe has exemplified,” said State Water Board Chair E. Joaquin Esquivel. “We’re proud to support the Tribe’s efforts to achieve a safe long-term drinking water supply.”

The water system, which serves 107 people, currently deploys point-of-use reverse osmosis devices to remove arsenic in each household, though it has no overall treatment process. This funding will help support the Tribe’s consistent management and maintenance of the point-of-use system to health-based drinking water standards.

“The Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe is truly happy to receive the SAFER funding,” said Tribal Chairman Shane Saulque. “It has brought great relief to our community to know that the maintenance of the point-of-use system is being funded and that a long-term drinking water solution is coming. This is a huge support for our day-to-day life.”

As part of its funding agreement with the Tribe, the board has committed to pay half the salary for four years of a water system operator with expertise in managing the point-of-use system while the sustainable solution is implemented. The board’s funding will also



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cover the costs of installing or replacing devices, as well as ongoing operations and maintenance, including water quality testing and filter replacement.

The Sanitation Facilities Construction Program of the IHS is funding and organizing the Tribe's long-term drinking water solution. The program provides American Indian and Alaska Native homes and communities with essential water supply, sewage disposal and solid waste disposal facilities.

"Serving the Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe by providing a sustainable drinking water solution is meeting the mission of the IHS' Sanitation Facilities Construction Program," said Louis Bernasconi, Reno district engineer. "We are happy to see that the Utu Utu Gwaitu Paiute Tribe has been granted board funds to maintain a certified water operator and conduct needed repairs to the existing point-of-use treatment units. This support complements our program's planning funds used to obtain sanitation construction funding. We hope to recommend the drilling of a new domestic drinking water well that is free of arsenic."

IHS expects the new well and treatment infrastructure to be completed within three years, after which point-of-use devices will no longer be necessary. The board's funding will retain the operator for an additional year, during which time the operator can complete all required certifications to run the new water system. At the end of that year, with the new infrastructure in place and certifications complete, the Tribe will have a sustainable water system that requires only an operator's salary and a normal operation-and-maintenance budget.

Since 2019, the board has provided nearly \$918,000 to 13 tribal communities and accelerated over 300 drinking water projects in disadvantaged communities by providing technical assistance resources.

Arsenic is ubiquitous in nature, commonly found in drinking water sources in California and can pose a cancer risk. At higher levels of exposure, arsenic can also result in vascular or skin damage. In 2006, California lowered the Maximum Contaminant Level for arsenic from 50 ug/L (micrograms per liter) to 10 ug/L, following the U.S. EPA's national MCL.

The State Water Board's mission is 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 resource allocation and efficient use for present and future generations.



The SAFER Program includes projects funded by the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, which is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment—particularly in disadvantaged communities.