



Fact Sheet

Affordable & Safe Drinking Water Initiative

Under California's Human Right to Water Policy ([Assembly Bill 685](#), Eng 2012), "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption ..."

However, for millions of Californians the costs of drinking water are unaffordable, and many of the state's residents [don't have access to clean and reliable drinking water](#).

Providing 'Lifeline' Rates is a Critical Need

California spends over \$2.5 billion per year to provide subsidized electric, gas, and telecommunications service to low-income residents. However, 56 percent of Californians have a water service provider that does not offer rate assistance to low-income customers. As the cost of water service becomes more expensive due to aging infrastructure, rising treatment costs, and the need to develop new, drought-resistant supplies, more low-income residents may be unable to afford their water bill.

Under [Assembly Bill 401 \(Dodd, 2015\)](#) the State Water Board is developing a plan for a statewide low-income rate assistance (LIRA) program. Researchers from University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) are assisting the State Water Board to analyze the funding required for a statewide LIRA program and how it could be administered. Initial cost estimates range from \$279 million to \$580 million depending whether existing water LIRA programs continue as currently designed. The State Water Board must submit a report to the Legislature with its recommendations by Feb. 1, 2018.

Many Communities Do Not Have Access to Safe Drinking Water

Although most of the state's residents receive drinking water that meets federal and state drinking water standards, many drinking water systems in the state consistently fail to provide safe drinking water to their customers. Lack of safe drinking water is a problem that disproportionately affects residents of California's disadvantaged communities. Over 300 drinking water systems in disadvantaged communities, serving approximately 200,000 people, are unable to provide safe drinking water. These systems include 30 schools and daycare centers that serve over 12,000 children.

The installation, operation and maintenance of drinking water treatment systems necessary to provide safe drinking water to these communities are often very costly. Although the state can assist these disadvantaged communities by paying for the construction costs of the treatment systems through financial assistance, such as the [Water Quality, Supply and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 \(Proposition 1\)](#) and the [Drinking Water State Revolving Fund](#), there

are no funding sources available to provide funding for long-term operations and maintenance costs, which public water systems must provide in order to gain access to the capital improvement funding that is available.

Disadvantaged communities often lack the rate base, as well as the technical, managerial, and financial capacity to show they can afford and effectively manage operations and maintenance costs related to water treatment. Without being able to pay for maintenance, these communities are effectively barred from accessing capital improvement funding. In contrast, larger water systems have the financial capacity both to pay treatment costs and to provide for a well-trained and technically competent workforce of water system operators.

Progress on Affordable and Safe Drinking Water for Disadvantaged Communities

In 2015, the “Resilient, Affordable, Safe Drinking Water for Disadvantaged Communities Framework” was created, which identified a series of measures necessary to ensure that all communities have access to safe and affordable water. Over the past two years, the Legislature and the Governor have taken important steps toward implementing the actions specified in the framework.

Those steps include:

- Chapter 27, Statutes of 2015 ([Senate Bill 88](#), Senate Committee on Fiscal Review): authorizes the State Water Board to require certain water systems that consistently fail to provide safe drinking water to [consolidate](#) with, or receive an extension of service from, another public water system.
- Chapter 773, Statutes of 2016 ([SB 552](#), Wolk): authorizes the State Water Board to require public water systems that serve disadvantaged communities and that consistently fail to provide an adequate and affordable source of safe drinking water, to obtain administrative and managerial services from an administrator selected by the State Water Board.
- Chapter 843, Statutes of 2016 ([SB 1263](#), Wieckowski): will help prevent the establishment of new, unsustainable public water systems.

The most significant remaining challenge is the lack of funding necessary to help subsidize the water rates paid by low-income residents, the costs of an administrator, and operation and maintenance of the drinking water systems.

Types of Contaminants Impacting Drinking Water Supplies

Nitrate

Contamination of drinking water supplies from use of nitrogen-based fertilizers in irrigated agriculture, waste from dairies, and other sources of nitrate is a serious problem in many areas of the state, particularly in the Tulare Lake Basin and Salinas Valley, where about 2.6 million people, including many of the poorest communities in California, rely on groundwater for their drinking water. In these areas, more than 250,000 people are at risk for nitrate contamination of drinking water. Nitrate affects the ability of human blood cells to carry oxygen, causing health problems.

However, many other areas of the state also have nitrate-contaminated groundwater, making it the most frequently detected anthropogenic chemical above a maximum contaminant level, or drinking water standard, in drinking water sources. Between 2002 and 2010, more than 200 water systems in California had nitrate levels that exceeded the drinking water standard. According to a University of California, Davis report, contamination in some areas will likely worsen for years to come, as nitrates applied decades ago continue to infiltrate local aquifers.

Arsenic and Other Contaminants

Drinking water may also be contaminated by naturally-occurring sources. In January 2013, the State Water Board submitted a report to the Legislature titled "[Communities That Rely on a Contaminated Groundwater Source for Drinking Water.](#)" This report found that from 2002-2010, 680 (out of 3,037) community water systems serving nearly 21 million residents relied on a contaminated groundwater source affected by one or more "principal contaminants." A principal contaminant is a chemical detected above a drinking water standard on two or more occasions during a sampling cycle. Thirty-one principal contaminants were identified: arsenic was the most detected naturally-occurring principal contaminant (287 water systems).

The report found that the other most common naturally-occurring sources of drinking water contamination were gross alpha activity, uranium and fluoride. After the report was published the state adopted a new maximum contaminant level for hexavalent chromium, another significant naturally-occurring source of drinking water contamination.

Identifying Communities Struggling to Provide Clean Drinking Water

In an effort to make the public aware of the problems public water systems are facing when it comes to providing clean and reliable drinking water, the State Water Board has developed a Human Right to Water web portal.

This new web portal includes downloadable information and a map that shows water systems that may not meet primary drinking water standards. The site also includes a link to the draft Safe Drinking Water Operations and Maintenance Needs Estimate spreadsheet, and an explanation document which lays out the methodology. Total needs are estimated at \$45 million annually, with 309 public water systems included in the analysis, serving approximately 200,000 people statewide.

For more information on the Low-Income Water Rate Assistance Program, visit the website:
http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/conservation_portal/assistance/

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