

# SAFER Drinking Water Advisory Group Special Meeting

## Draft Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Fund Expenditure Plan

Meeting Notes | July 17, 2025

### Overview

The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Advisory Group participated in a special meeting to discuss the Draft Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Fund Expenditure Plan.

SAFER Advisory Group Members responded to an introductory question about funding a project that would contribute to achieving the SAFER goals:

- Increase support for Merced County underserved communities regarding failing water systems and connections to water.
- Increase efforts in raising awareness on water quality in domestic wells and sampling.
- Continue to communicate, clarify, coordinate, where the State Water Board's responsibilities lie as well as other funding agencies particularly around drought and domestic wells.
- Improve and coordinate messaging on domestic wells around the health of residents and impact on water quality and the various water programs that lead to community confusion, including Groundwater Sustainability Agencies, Nitrate Control Programs, and County programs.
- Annexation of water systems between Lanare and Riverdale and capacity to have connections among systems.
- Highlight individual success stories, community health, location, and how many individuals have drinking water now.
- A growing understanding of projects that fall outside the standard SAFER approaches to moving towards using more flexible and context-specific methods.
- Changes in the limits of costs for domestic wells with contaminants.
- More effective and efficient technical assistance program that works for providers and communities.
- Highlight more successes.

### Draft Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Fund Expenditure Plan

#### Domestic Wells and State Small Water Systems

- Advisory Group member inquired about filling funding gaps for local mitigation programs; education being provided to domestic wells and state small water systems on long-term solutions.
  - Staff responded that SAFER would pay for costs if there is no local mitigation program or third-party funding option. The key is to identify funding pathways and households.

- Advisory Group member emphasized the importance of community outreach and inquired about technical assistance in domestic wells and state small water systems scenarios. For a community of independent domestic well owners, who is the recipient in the absence of an existing technical assistant organization?
  - Staff responded that the Water Boards aim to engage communities in consolidation efforts without needing a formal system; decentralized treatment pilots are being conducted, and projects are hoped to expand based on lessons learned.
- Advisory Group member advised that there are already great resources that exist around domestic wells education and outreach ([privatewellclass.org](http://privatewellclass.org)) and suggests leveraging existing organizations and programs that have developed material to disseminate the information.
- Advisory Group member emphasized the need for better strategy, coordination, and a centralized role to help communities navigate various programs and agencies, rather than placing the burden on the communities themselves.
- Advisory Group Members discussed the gaps and inconsistencies in mitigation programs for domestic wells at Groundwater Sustainability Agencies. They suggested coordinating existing programs and leveraging existing drinking water guidelines.
- Advisory Group member highlighted the challenges in consolidating county and city water systems due to county barriers and emphasized the need for a liaison to facilitate the long-term solution process. They are receiving emergency water.
  - Staff responded by highlighting the challenges in coordinating various stakeholders and agencies. Private systems are not regulated, which limits the influence of the Water Boards. Staff offered to connect them to the Division of Drinking Water engagement unit to facilitate this process.

#### **SAFER PROGRAM Funding Commitments**

- Advisory Group member inquired about the priority order for using SAFER Program funding.
  - Staff responded that SAFER funds are being used as a last resort because they don't expire. Federal funds are used first, and if there's a funding eligibility gap, then secondary sources are utilized.
- Advisory Group member noted that the California water systems consolidation survey sent to systems tagged by the board as working on consolidations confirmed that some are not pursuing consolidation, suggesting caution in assuming all are actual projects and instead thinking of them as potential projects.
- Advisory Group member expressed concerns about the administrative effort required for technical assistance recipients, noting it's a significant task even for established systems. They inquire about addressing this need for domestic well users.

- Staff explained that individual funding agreements with homeowners are not feasible. Instead, funding must be administered by a third party or a public water system to connect the wells.

### **Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund Targets**

- Advisory Group member emphasized the need for education on operation and maintenance to ensure the sustainability of drinking water systems. He noted the lack of increase in drinking water replacement programs and expressed hope for an increase in SAFER staff to enhance the program's efficacy.
- Advisory Group member inquired about moving everyone towards technical assistance or if that is due to lack of demand for other services.
  - Staff explained that the program supports disadvantaged communities and highlighted the shift from planning grants to technical assistance due to planning barriers for small systems
- Advisory Group member suggested that splitting technical assistance into planning and non-planning categories could provide more clarity.
- Advisory Group member sought to clarify if the funds that are no longer allocated toward planning are going towards technical assistance.
  - Staff explained that planning assistance can be provided through either technical assistance providers or planning grants. These grants are offered through funding programs using federal funds, not SAFER since there is more than one funding source.
- Advisory Group member asked for the breakdown on the allocation of technical assistance funding for domestic wells and state small water systems and a report next year on how technical assistance funds were spent.
  - Staff explained that the allocation of technical assistance funding for communities served by domestic wells and state small water systems have started, but funding is insufficient to complete them. Future allocations will be based on outlined needs. The allocations are not “hard numbers” and can be reallocated depending on demand. There is more information to report technical assistance services and funds.

### **Interim Assistance and Local Mitigation Programs**

- Advisory Group member noted that Valley Water Collaborative also covers Yolo, Eastern San Joaquin, Delta Mendota, Merced and Madera Basins.
- Advisory Group member inquired about the State program reviewing a homeowner's application again if they are denied service by a local program, if the local program still accepting new applications.
  - Staff explained that if the household is eligible for the State program, the Water Boards can enroll them only if the local program has denied them service.

- Advisory Group member inquired if the state monitors local solutions for homeowners to ensure they move toward better options.
  - Staff explained challenges in accessing local mitigation programs due to outreach limitations and the variability of information shared by local programs. The Water Boards work with communities, but there is uncertainty about the reach and how far solutions can go.
- Advisory group member suggested adding the distinction of local boundaries to the Fund Expenditure Plan discussion. They inquired if it is board policy to only provide interim solutions to communities with less than 1000 residents and what the solution for systems serving more than 1000 people is.
  - Staff stated that interim assistance for larger communities is not feasible. The program focuses on providing bottled water to vulnerable populations in public water systems, as expanding the program would reduce the capacity for long-term solutions.
- Advisory Group member expressed concerns about the equity of individual household eligibility based on income for public water systems needing interim solution; solutions for system issues typically take 5-10 years.
- Advisory Group member expressed concerns about the limitations of interim assistance for communities seeking long-term solutions and questioned if there are exemptions for such limits.
  - Staff stated that the Division of Financial Assistance aims to add clarifying language for flexibility based on the community's long-term solutions, handling each case individually.
- Advisory Group member sought clarification on the meaning of "operational" particularly where households switching programs could lose eligibility.
  - Staff explained that operational means being able to enroll households. Local partners should communicate with households to avoid the loss of service when switching programs, to see if there could be a continuation of service through another program.
- Advisory Group member inquired about bottled water programs for vulnerable populations and questions if it's a new policy.
  - Staff explained that the effort is a guiding methodology due to the challenges of supplying water to thousands of people.
  - Staff clarified that bottled water can be provided in situations involving domestic wells or state small water systems, citing a recent example of a Central Valley Salinity Alternatives for Longterm Sustainability Program request to provide bottled water to Cutler, and focus on the most vulnerable populations. It's a risk management approach in these types of situations.

- Advisory Group member expressed concerns that the current definition of vulnerability for nitrate contamination (pregnant women and infants under one is too restrictive and may affect domestic well replacement programs.
- Advisory Group member advised that bottled water for too long can be counterproductive; they have received bottled water for two years and appreciate the support while they work on a connection but prefer to have a long-term solution.

#### **Technical Assistance Milestones**

- Advisory Group member inquired if the Water Board has assessed the duration of the planning phase when an administrator has been appointed for the system.
  - Staff responded that there is no full analysis available, as only a few systems have had an administrator appointed, and the assessment process takes a long time.
- Advisory Group member inquired if local agencies are informed about SAFER's activities for domestic wells and State small water systems, suggesting that local agencies could provide valuable on-the-ground information.
  - Staff responded that local agencies are aware of ongoing issues but are unable to engage because their focus is on public water systems with over 15 connections. The Water Board does not have authority over small water systems and domestic wells. However, the Division of Drinking Water's SAFER engagement teams are more engaged in these types of solutions.

#### **Technical Assistance Clarifying Decision Criteria**

- Advisory Group member inquired about both Letter of Interest and Letter of Intent being required.
  - Staff explained that they are looking for interest and confidence in project completion when funding is granted.
- Advisory Group member inquired about SAFER's interaction with the Department of Water Resources emergency groundwater program, noting example in Orland.
  - Staff responded that the appropriate office would handle requests and advise on a coordination call between both agencies. Staff will follow up with Advisory Group member on the Orland Project.
- Advisory Group member shared a concern about mixed-income projects affecting eligibility.
- Advisory Group member discussed the need for efficient use of funds and minimizing administrative costs.
  - Staff mentioned the open comment period on the intended use plan and encouraged them to submit public comment.

## Advisory Group Member Announcements

- Advisory Group member Stephanie Anagnoson: Madera County Groundwater Sustainability Agency moved forward fee for domestic well mitigation for those on irrigated lands which means there will be a source of funding. It is currently under litigation.
- Advisory Group member Rami Kahlon: Cal Water Service acquired two water systems in Bakersfield - Casa Loma and Palm Mutual. Casa Loma appears on dashboard as an at-risk system, however Palm Mutual is off the radar and Cal Water is happy to pursue the consolidations.
  - The fourth SAFER Advisory Group Meeting will be hosted by Cal Water service in Salinas on December 11, with a morning meeting and an afternoon tour of drinking water projects.

Public Comment - None

## Water Board Next Steps

Third quarterly SAFER Advisory Group Meeting is scheduled for September 18, 2025

## Advisory Group Attendance (P= present, A= absent)

Norma I. Amezcua (P)	Angela Islas (P)	Edwin Alonzo (P)
Juan Cano (P)	Parry Klassen (P)	Stephanie Anagnoson (P)
Irene Cacho (P)	Michael Knight (P)	Don James (A)
Kristin Dobbin (P)	Erick Orellana (P)	Rami Kahlon (P)
Tequita Jefferson (A)	Adam J. Rausch (P)	Shannon Murphy (P)
Soren Nelson (P)	Isabel Solorio (A)	
Silverio Pérez (P)	James Sullivan (P)	

## State Water Board Attendance

**Board Members:** Laural Firestone

**Division of Drinking Water:** Chad Fischer, Andrew Altevogt

**Division of Financial Assistance:** Jasmine Oaxaca, Karmina Padgett, Kristyn Abhold, Joe Karkoski

**Office of Public Engagement, Equity and Tribal Affairs:** Adriana Renteria, Julia Glick, Aaron Dickinson, Alma López

**Office of Chief Counsel:** Anthony Austin