

2026 SAFER Drinking Water Advisory Group Meeting #2

Meeting Notes – May 28, 2026

Overview

The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Advisory Group held its second meeting of 2026. The agenda included a presentation by the Division of Drinking Water on the upcoming Annual Needs Assessment Dashboard and a presentation by the Division of Financial Assistance on the development and anticipated funding of the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Fund Expenditure Plan. Advisory Group members participated in breakout sessions to discuss funding priorities and potential solutions to eligibility challenges experienced in the current fiscal year's Fund Expenditure Plan. Advisory Group members received an update on the Point of Use and Point of Entry Pilot Program and had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss the project with staff.

Annual Needs Assessment Dashboard

Staff in the Division of Drinking Water presented an update of the public water system risk assessment methodology and upcoming changes to the Annual Needs Assessment, including the development of new online dashboards.

- The presentation included information on how new [regulations](#) for [Hexavalent Chromium \(Cr6\)](#) and [per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances \(PFAS\)](#), as well as updates to median household income methodology, will impact results for the Annual Needs Assessment. Regulations will be applied to large water systems first, followed by medium and small systems. As of 12/31/2025, 98.6% of Californians receive drinking water that meets regulatory standards. However, once the updated regulations become effective, additional water systems may be added to the failing list.
- Staff provided a preview of three online dashboards that will incorporate results from the Annual Needs Assessment (expected publish date July 1, 2026).
- Advisory Group members asked how water system size is defined in relation to the new regulations; how changes to Median Household Income will impact a water system's status as a disadvantaged community and ability to apply for grant funding; if water systems will still be able to request data changes in the new dashboards; if private well data can also be captured in the dashboards; and if hexavalent chromium and PFAS also apply to state smalls and domestic wells.
 - Water Board staff clarified that the [hexavalent chromium regulation](#) has the detailed definition of the water system size; a water system serving a disadvantaged community already receiving funding will not lose its eligibility, but a new system not considered disadvantaged under new methodology, would not be eligible; water systems will still be able to request for data change; a separate dashboard exists for state small water systems and domestic wells because the regulations are drastically different. While the new regulations apply to public water systems, the presence of hexavalent chromium and PFAS in domestic wells will be considered for funding.

Fund Expenditure Plan Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Development

Staff in the Division of Financial Assistance presented an overview of the Annual Fund Expenditure plan and described that due to anticipated funding changes, the draft for the 2026-2027 Fund Expenditure Plan will likely not be available until late summer 2026.

- Advisory Group members requested clarification on the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund.

- Water Board staff clarified that the projected funding availability for fiscal year 2026-2027 SAFER program is estimated to be at \$815.2 million in total, including \$99.7 million for the state funded Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, a reduction from the \$130 million committed in previous years. The \$99.7 million is carryover from the current year and is the most flexible source of funding that does not expire annually. Since the SAFER Program is in the third tier of the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, allocation information will be available spring of the next fiscal year.

Funding Eligibility Challenges

Staff from the Division of Financial Assistance provided an overview of eligibility challenges in technical assistance, interim assistance, consolidations, and operation and maintenance in the current fiscal year.

Advisory Group members provided the following reflections:

- Disappointment regarding the projected funding, noting that it falls short of what was promised to communities, emphasizing that a lot of communities still need support that are not yet receiving funding.
- Encourage the prioritization of technical assistance and interim assistance while identifying and utilizing alternative programs and funding sources so that the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund is not used when other resources are available.
- Recommend increasing funding for administrator support for communities that need it.
- Concerns regarding 1) the intention of operation and maintenance support for communities with high water rates emphasizing that it was supposed to be long-term support, not interim; 2) bottled water eligibility for only acute contaminants is a very problematic policy because what is being communicated is that Water Boards is okay not providing a solution for other contaminants, and 3) the underutilization of the Division of Drinking Water's authority to mandate consolidations, **to ensure participation from the receiving water systems**, which can otherwise result in delays and additional funding complications.

Breakout Groups

Advisory Group members participated in two breakout group sessions with Water Board staff. In the first breakout group, Advisory Group members discussed the barriers they have encountered in their own work with operations and maintenance, technical assistance, bottled water, and consolidation efforts. In the second breakout group, Advisory Group members participated in an exercise to identify how they would suggest distributing \$50M of the available Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund that has not been committed, across solution types, for the next fiscal year. Advisory Group members provided the following recommendations:

- **Fund community engagement as part of consolidation workplans and maintain consistent community engagement efforts to build trust.** Sending letters without building relationships with community only exacerbates distrust in mostly immigrant communities.
- **Streamline application processes and technical assistance workplan amendments (i.e. improved project manager handoffs, consistent review standards).** The amount of time it takes to approve a workplan affirms a culture of lack of urgency on the Water Boards end.
- **Prioritize communities with long standing water issues that are already engaged and have projects that are shovel ready** with the requirement of having the community receiving funding to engage and guide other communities applying for SAFER funding through the process of moving a project forward.
- Flexibility around interim assistance eligibility to be able to support impacted communities with unique or uncharacteristic circumstances, such as communities with income right above the low-

income threshold.

- Requested a report back on the Stantec community partner pilot program.
- Address standard language in funding agreements for receiving water systems that create a barrier due to the requirement to maintain liability on the project even if the funding is withdrawn.
- Improve communication and coordination within different teams in the Division of Financial Assistance.
- Clarify where costs could be reduced via consolidations because consolidations can also raise costs; some communities will always need to be subsidized.
- Prioritize funding by having responsible parties pay their share for their impacts on groundwater and create a standardized approach for Groundwater Sustainability Agencies well mitigation programs. Much of the spending on interim water solutions is likely due to issues caused by CV SALTS and Groundwater Sustainable Agencies. SAFER should not fund interim solutions for high nitrates managed by other programs.
- Explore managerial programs and shared operator models (e.g., Water 120-style networks).

SAFER Program Updates and Announcements

Point of Use/Point of Entry Pilot Program Progress

Staff from the Division of Financial Assistance and Division of Drinking Water provided an update to an existing pilot program that addresses Point of Use/Point of Entry water filtration devices as a potential long-term solution for water quality issues. The pilot consists of six studies that focus on community education and public outreach, performance certification, workforce development, solutions for bacteriological contamination in domestic wells, the use of smart devices, and the benefits and drawbacks of Point of Use vs. Point of Entry filtration devices.

- Advisory Group members emphasized the importance of ensuring that true long-term solutions are prioritized over interim solutions such as point of use/point of entry devices being used on a long-term basis.
- Support for the pilot program was also expressed, as it will provide answers to long-standing questions about Point of Use and Point of Entry filtration devices.

Action Items Report Back

Water Boards staff provided a report back to questions that Advisory Group members had asked in the first meeting of 2026, including if there was geospatial data for failing systems, the number of receiving water systems that have consolidated two or more water systems and the number of water systems on the failing list that returned to compliance and were later placed back on the failing list.

- Staff responded that the geospatial data can be found on the SAFER dashboard; approximately 70 water systems have consolidated two or more water systems, including completed consolidation or consolidations that are in-progress; and that also about 70 water systems have repeat failures, where half of the instances is due to a reoccurrence of the original issue and the other half of the instances is due to a new issue encountered by the water system.

Advisory Group Member Announcements

- Advisory Group member Angela Islas with Central California Environmental Justice Network, encouraged Advisory Group members to tune into the California Air Resources Board meeting on Friday, May 29 regarding the Cap and Invest proposal. There were over 200 commentors, many of them discussing how the new regulations would negatively impact the emergency services provided by a lot of programs, especially SAFER.

- Advisory Group member Erick Orellana with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability shared that Leadership Counsel is working with community of Tombstone, CA where Governor Newsom signed SB 200 that created the SAFER program. Tombstone recently got fully connected and is now receiving drinking water.
- Advisory Group member Maureen Thompson with Valley Water Collaborative has free well testing for communities from Madera to Yolo Counties.

Public Comment

- Stephanie Villegas, representing the Rural Community Assistance Corporation (RCAC), provided a public comment expressing concerns about proposed changes to the Fund Expenditure Plan regarding bottled water assistance to schools and small, rural communities. Of the currently enrolled 77 schools and communities, only 14 have acute contaminants. The new Fund Expenditure Plan eligibility criteria could unintentionally exclude vulnerable schools and communities, especially those not classified as public water systems, but currently impacted by contaminants such as arsenic, uranium, and 1,2,3-TCP, leading to disenrollment and delayed access to safe water. The Rural Community Assistance Corporation urged the expansion of eligibility criteria to include all water quality and supply issues or, alternatively, recommended strong public engagement, consistent messaging, and outreach to affected communities and schools regarding any program changes. The comment stressed the health risks associated with contaminants like arsenic, uranium, and 1,2,3-TCP and the importance of continued support for those impacted.
 - Advisory Group member asked for list of acute contaminants and its definition. State Water Board staff responded that “acute” refers to when a single glass of water could have health impacts versus “chronic” where the health effects are long term from the consumption of two liters of water for over a period of 70 years. Acute contaminants include nitrate, nitrite, chlorate, bacteriological contaminants, and any surface water treatment related violation because there is bacteria, virus, or cryptosporidium present.

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

Norma I. Amezcua (P)	Angela Islas (P)	Adam J. Rausch (P)
Irene Cacho (P)	Michael Knight (P)	Destiny Rodriguez (P)
Juan Cano (P)	Shannon Murphy (A)	Angela Ruiz-Alvarez (A)
Rosa Carrillo (P)	Soren Nelson (P)	James Sullivan (P)
Kristen Dobbin (P)	Wajiha Noor (P)	Maureen Thompson (P)
Tequita Jefferson (A)	Erick Orellana (P)	
Bruce Houdesheldt (P)	Timoteo Prado (P)	

State Water Board Attendance

Board Member: Laurel Firestone

Division of Drinking Water: Bryan Potter, Chad Fischer, Andrew Altevogt, Dan Wang, Deborah, Lancaster, Hee Kyung Lim, Ileana Wald

Division of Financial Assistance: Jeff Wetzel, Jasmine Oaxaca, Kristyn Abhold, Karmina Padgett, James Garrett

Office of Chief Counsel: Lauren Marshall

Office of Public Engagement, Equity and Tribal Affairs: Adriana Renteria, Amelia Nishimura, Manuel Leon, Mandy Roman, Lacey Carlson, Alma López