



Media Release

As drought strains supply, report describes challenges to providing safe drinking water

Assessment examines risks to water supply and water quality

May 5, 2022

Contact: [Blair Robertson](#) – Public Information Officer

SACRAMENTO – Advancing its mission to ensure every Californian has safe and affordable drinking water, the State Water Resources Control Board has released the [second annual Drinking Water Needs Assessment](#), which evaluates the overall health of drinking water systems and domestic wells across the state. New this year, the report estimates the cost of infrastructure requirements and predicts the risk of groundwater contamination issues and supply shortages for small systems and rural communities related to drought.

Among the report's sobering findings is the reality that, for reasons exacerbated by a third consecutive year of drought, over half of California's 1,300 state small water systems (serving fewer than 25 people) and 312,000 domestic wells are at risk or potentially at risk of experiencing drinking water shortages and failing to meet water quality standards.

"Ongoing drought is challenging our state's aspiration to deliver on its first-in-the-nation Human Right to Water legislation passed 10 years ago. Specifically, it makes the supply of safe and affordable drinking water even more precarious for smaller water systems, which already struggle with aging infrastructure, emerging contaminants and other threats," said Joaquin Esquivel, chair of the State Water Board. "Our report's findings reinforce the timeliness and necessity of historic federal infrastructure spending this year, which, combined with the \$5.2 billion in state drought and water resilience funding California invested last year, offer us renewed hope and a generational opportunity to respond to drought and climate change by reinvesting in our water future."

In addition to continuing last year's examination of water resiliency for small systems and domestic wells, this year's report adds an analysis of medium-sized public water systems serving up to 100,000 people.

Additional key findings are:

- Of the 3,066 water systems analyzed (serving 15 million people), about 11% are *failing*, meaning they are not meeting one or more key [Human Right to Water](#)



CALIFORNIA ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

STATE WATER RESOURCES CONTROL BOARD

1001 I Street, Sacramento, CA 95814 • Mailing Address: P.O. Box 100, Sacramento, CA 95812-0100 • www.waterboards.ca.gov



goals for providing safe, accessible or affordable drinking water, and/or maintaining a sustainable water system. Nearly 17% are considered *at risk of failing* to meet one or more of these goals.

- Ninety-five percent of those failing are small water systems with 3,000 or fewer service connections.
- Failing water systems and at-risk domestic wells are typically located in areas with higher pollution burdens, higher poverty and serve a higher percentage of non-white customers.
- Small public water systems with up to 3,000 service connections and K-12 schools will need between \$1.2 billion and \$4.8 billion to meet new drought infrastructure requirements mandated by [Senate Bill 552](#) (2021), which include well monitoring and alternate water sources and electrical supplies. This estimate does not include fire flow obligations, which systems have until 2032 to implement.

The board has released a [new online dashboard](#) where users can explore the results of the Needs Assessment, learn whether and why particular water systems are failing or at-risk, and determine if those systems are receiving financial assistance.

The needs assessment is part of the board's [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience](#) (SAFER) Program, which deploys short- and long-term strategies designed to ensure that Californians who lack safe, adequate and affordable drinking water receive it as quickly as possible, and that the water systems serving them establish sustainable solutions. The program was created by the board after the passage of Senate Bill 200, which Gov. Gavin Newsom signed into law in 2019.

Consolidation with larger, high-capacity systems is one of the program's primary solutions to help communities deliver safe drinking water. About 40% of water systems identified as failing in the report are considering consolidating with a larger system, and altogether, 170 systems are in the process of consolidating. Last year, the board's [Division of Financial Assistance](#) executed \$485 million in SAFER funding for 57 construction and planning projects, including 11 consolidations. Additionally, a total of 81 communities succeeded in bringing about long-term drinking water solutions through the program, benefiting 200,000 Californians.

The time and resources communities have directly influence the speed at which their drinking water problems can be solved. The SAFER program emphasizes collective responsibility to encourage water systems, nonprofit organizations, governments, a [community advisory group](#) and a variety of other stakeholders to develop and implement solutions. The Drinking Water Needs Assessment is key to informing many of these efforts, including prioritizing the allocation of monies from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund as expressed through the annual [Fund Expenditure Plan](#), adopted by the State Water Board each year.

The Governor's [California Comeback Plan](#) bolsters ongoing state support for drinking water resilience through the Drinking Water Fund with the additional investment of \$5.2 billion over the next three years in the state's overall water portfolio, including funding to strengthen drought response, secure and expand water supplies and support drinking water and wastewater infrastructure, with a focus on small and disadvantaged communities.

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 the benefit of present and future generations.