

Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Program

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the SAFER Program?

The SAFER Program is a set of tools, funding sources, and regulatory authorities designed to ensure Californians who currently lack safe and affordable drinking water receive it as quickly as possible:

- Through its Division of Drinking Water, the State Water Board is responsible for enforcing federal and state drinking water statutes and regulating over 7,400 public water systems.
- Through its Division of Financial Assistance, the State Water Board awards state and federal grants and loans for drinking water projects, including funding from the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, to support safe drinking water needs.
- Through its Office of Public Participation, the State Water Board provides community engagement assistance to support effective public participation in State Water Board decisions and actions.

The primary purpose of the SAFER Program is to bring true environmental justice to California and address the continuing disproportionate environmental burdens in the state by assisting with providing safe drinking water in every California community, for every Californian.

SAFER funds will help water systems provide a safe, accessible, and affordable supply of drinking water to communities in both the near and long terms by accelerating implementation of short- and long-term drinking water solutions, moving water systems to more efficient modes of operation, providing short-term operation and maintenance support as a bridge until long-term sustainable solutions are in place, and providing long-term operation and maintenance support when necessary.

The SAFER Program supports permanent and sustainable drinking water solutions that ensure all Californians have access to safe, affordable, and reliable drinking water.

Why is the SAFER Program necessary?

Many small water systems in disadvantaged communities are unable to deliver clean water at affordable rates due to the cost of operation and maintenance. Although state funding is

generally available for safe drinking water infrastructure, state funds have not been routinely available for operation and maintenance costs.

In the past, the lack of funds for operations and maintenance prevented the state from funding the installation of much-needed treatment facilities. The SAFER Program helps resolve a critical piece of this puzzle by allowing the State Water Board to comprehensively address the full array of issues that prevent water systems from providing safe and affordable drinking water.

What are Operation and Maintenance costs?

Operation and maintenance costs typically include the following:

- Staff costs (management, administrative, operations, etc.)
- Financial services (bookkeeping, billing, accounting, audit and financial reporting)
- Professional services (certified operator, engineer, attorney)
- Insurance and energy costs.
- Fees incurred for water quality monitoring, permits, annual equipment and infrastructure repair and replacement, wholesale water purchases, chemical or other water quality treatment materials and any residual disposal.

Who needs the most help?

Hundreds of small, disadvantaged communities have been burdened by unsafe drinking water for years:

- More than half a million Californians are currently without clean drinking water because of systems that contain contaminants such as arsenic, nitrates and 123-TCP. Over time, exposure to any of these can increase health risks to children and adults.
- More than 500 rural and small water systems with less than 100 connections face the greatest risk—these systems are least likely to afford necessary upgrades or absorb the cost of consolidating with another system. By contrast, more than 400 of the largest systems (with 3,000 or more customers) that serve more than 90 percent of the state's 39.5 million residents have delivered safe drinking water to customers for decades.

What types of solutions are available?

- The SAFER Program focuses on both short-term and long-term solutions: Short-term solutions are intended to address immediate drinking water and public health needs while long-term solutions are developed. Short-term solutions include temporarily connecting to safe drinking water sources, installing point-of-use or point-of-entry treatment systems, drilling wells into uncontaminated aquifers, and providing water directly to communities (e.g., bottled water or hauled water).

- The long-term goal is that all California drinking water systems are sustainable and affordable. Long-term solutions that will lead to self-sufficient drinking water systems include system upgrades, consolidation and regionalization (e.g. linking smaller systems to larger ones), and training and developing local technical and managerial staff.

How will the Board prioritize communities or projects?

Initially, the Board is focusing available funds on water systems in violation of public health standards, water systems that are at-risk, and domestic well users in high-risk areas:

Public Water Systems

Priority will be given to consolidation or regionalization projects that show long-term resiliency and sustainability for communities or schools unable to meet Safe Drinking Water Act standards. The [guidance and prioritization policy](#) adopted as a part of the Drinking Water State Revolving Fund will be used as a basis for these projects. Construction projects will be required to develop plans to achieve long-term resiliency and sustainability within five years.

Communities on domestic wells or state small water systems

In areas with high population density but without centralized infrastructure, priority will be given to consolidation or regionalization projects that move disadvantaged communities without public water systems into larger public water systems, especially in areas with high risk of contamination or water shortage.

Remote or isolated homes or state small water systems

Well rehabilitation or [point-of-use \(POU\) and point-of-entry \(POE\) treatment options](#) will likely be the best long-term solutions for households in remote or isolated areas (where consolidation is not feasible) with known or high risk of contamination or water shortage.

What are the SAFER Program goals?

The overarching goal of the SAFER Program is to provide safe drinking water in every California community, for every Californian:

Short-term goals:

- Provide safe drinking water to as many communities and people, as quickly and efficiently as possible. This may be through replacement water, appointing Administrators to assess the status and needs of failing systems and identifying opportunities to increase efficiency, and accelerating implementation of capital projects.
- Promote consolidation and extension of service.

Long-term goals:

- Support water system improvements such as system upgrades and building technical, managerial, and financial capacity to make systems safe, efficient, and sustainable.

- Facilitate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions and/or improve climate change adaptation and resiliency of disadvantaged communities, low-income households, or low-income communities.

Building upon the progress the State Water Board has already made, efforts will be undertaken to meet the following goals in the first year:

- Provide temporary supplies of safe drinking water for up to 75 communities and schools.
- Offer assistance for long-term planning and solutions for 100 communities.
- Accelerate permanent, sustainable solutions for 75 communities.

An estimated 250,000 Californians are expected to benefit within the first 12 months.

What is the Division of Drinking Water?

The Division of Drinking Water regulates the state's 7,400 public water systems, oversees water recycling projects, permits water treatment devices, supports and promotes water system security, and works closely with the Division of Financial Assistance on funding for water systems. The Division of Drinking Water also reviews drinking water quality data, performs triennial reviews of public water systems as part of its regulatory oversight responsibilities, and directs small systems struggling to deliver potable water to technical and financial assistance programs.

What is the Division of Financial Assistance?

The Division of Financial Assistance implements the State Water Board's financial assistance programs using a variety of funding resources. These resources include loan and grant funding for drinking water projects and upgrades, municipal sewage and water recycling facilities, remediation for underground storage tank releases, watershed protection projects, nonpoint source pollution control projects, and more.

What is the Office of Public Participation?

The Office of Public Participation works to strengthen Water Boards efforts at engaging all Californians in decision-making processes by assisting with the design and implementation of effective stakeholder engagement activities. The Office of Public Participation most often assists with projects involving Environmental Justice and Native American Tribal consultation.

For more information on SAFER, visit waterboards.ca.gov/safer.

(This Fact Sheet was last updated on April 22, 2020)