



State Water Board Report Recommends Actions to Ensure Safe Drinking Water for All

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SACRAMENTO – Working to ensure all Californians have access to safe drinking water, the State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) today released recommendations to address the impacts of nitrate-contaminated groundwater – a source of drinking water for 2.6 million of the state’s residents.

Today’s report titled “*Recommendations Addressing Nitrate in Groundwater*” examines the impacts of nitrates – which are principally a by-product of fertilizers – on community access to safe, affordable drinking water. As pointed out in the report, nitrate contamination is particularly significant in the Tulare Lake Basin and Salinas Valley areas. The recommendations included in the report to the Legislature further underscore the need for cooperative and comprehensive solutions to improve the quality of all drinking water sources in California.

Many of the recommendations in today’s report rely upon a secure and stable source of funding to be effective. Without identifying a secure source of funding, nitrates and other contaminants will continue to affect drinking water sources resulting in residents and communities, particularly those that are small and disadvantaged, paying more for safe drinking water. The report examines several options at how such funding might be identified and the Administration will work with the Legislature to address the need for a sustainable funding source for groundwater-dependent communities dealing with all forms of groundwater contamination, including nitrates.

The nitrate report follows the State Water Board’s February 4, 2013 release of a [report](#) that identifies communities relying on contaminated groundwater sources for their drinking water. Arsenic and nitrates were the two major contaminants.

“These two reports reflect the broad challenges we face and offer the same stark conclusion about the need to address statewide groundwater contamination,” said Charles R. Hoppin, Chair of the State Water Board. “Governor Brown has stated that safe drinking water is a human right and it is our job to work with all parties to identify and implement viable solutions.”

A number of steps are already being taken by the administration to address nitrate contamination. The California Department of Public Health (CDPH), for example, is currently

revising the process for making emergency funding available for local water systems with immediate, emergency needs, and is working with state and local partners to support consolidation of projects that will more efficiently improve water systems' delivery of safe drinking water.

"CDPH monitors the quality of drinking water, assists systems in addressing contaminants such as nitrates, and enforces health standards in drinking water," said Dr. Ron Chapman, CDPH director and public health officer. "We provide funding for planning and construction of water projects and to address emergency drinking water issues. Our goal is for California to have access to safe drinking water that meets health-based standards."

The California Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA) is working with other state agencies and the farming community to address the issue. Farmers and ranchers have recognized and responded to the issues of nitrates and groundwater quality with improved technologies and methods that allow fertilizer to be applied more precisely than ever before. However, much more needs to be done.

"California's farmers have an important role to play in ensuring safe drinking water in their communities," said CDFA Secretary Karen Ross. "We fully support the Governor's call for a collaborative, cooperative effort among our agencies, industries and communities to identify both funding and solutions."

The Department of Water Resources (DWR) is working with CDPH to fund those communities with the most critical needs for safe drinking water.

"DWR is committed to the State's efforts to provide all Californians with safe drinking water," said Director Mark Cowin. "We will make it a priority to streamline our application process for the small disadvantaged communities."

These cooperative efforts are critical to meet the goals of Assembly Bill 685, signed into law last year by Governor Brown, which stated that every human being has the right to safe, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes.

In addition to the actions already under way, the Administration has committed to a number of other efforts that can begin immediately, without Legislative authority, including:

- The Water Boards will identify nitrate high-risk areas so regulatory oversight and assistance efforts can be prioritized on these areas first.
- The Water Boards, in coordination with CDFA, will convene a stakeholder/expert group to review existing agriculture best practices concerning nitrates, and develop recommendations in an effort to further protect groundwater quality through practices and existing regulatory programs.

- DWR will require that Integrated Regional Water Management (IRWM) plans for regions in nitrate high-risk areas include an evaluation of nitrate impacts and potential solutions as part of their critical water supply and water quality needs analysis. DWR and IRWM groups should target funding for potential solutions in nitrate high-risk areas.
- CDFA will immediately establish an interagency task force in collaboration with the State Water Resources Control Board to assess nitrogen management tracking and data needs in nitrate high risk areas.
- CDFA, in partnership with UC Cooperative Extension and other experts, will develop additional nitrogen management technical training programs to provide growers with on-the-ground tools and to facilitate regulatory compliance.
- CDFA will work with experts to identify research gaps in understanding the movement of nitrogen and other nutrients through soil and groundwater systems, and establish a research collaborative to pursue funding sources for this research.
- CDPH will create a Pre-Planning and Legal Entity Formation Assistance Program under an SRF Local Assistance Set-aside to assist small communities disproportionately affected by drinking water contaminants, such as nitrates, in accessing the project funding process. Funded pre-planning activities may include improving or establishing governance, formation of public water systems, or consolidation efforts.
- CDPH has proposed a Change to the SRF Process for Emergency Projects that would allow public water systems with emergencies requiring system repair or replacement to avoid serious health effects to immediately apply and be prioritized for funding. This change will expedite the use of SRF funds for such emergencies, augmenting the existing Proposition 84 emergency funding.
- CDPH will incorporate its recent Small Water System Program Implementation Plan into its Capacity Development Strategy with USEPA, allowing the use of SRF funds for some of the activities in this plan. CDPH's overarching goal is to bring the proportion of small systems that meet all health-based standards to 95% within three years, reaching parity with large water systems.
- CDPH will continue to promote Consolidation in planning and construction projects, including new incentives that will be implemented to encourage large water systems to consolidate with small systems that have safe drinking water compliance challenges – consolidation can be the most cost-effective and expeditious solution to these challenges.

Recommendations were made with significant input from multiple sources including:

- Interagency Task Force, which included representatives from the California Department of Public Health, the Department of Food and Agriculture, the Department of Pesticide Regulation, California Environmental Protection Agency, and local environmental health agencies;
- Public input from the May 2012 State Water Board workshop;

- Nitrate report by University of California, Davis (March 2012); and
- Report from Governor's Drinking Water Stakeholder Group (August 2012)

A copy of the full nitrate report and other information related to this process may be found at:
http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/nitrate_project/index.shtml

To see a fact sheet on what actions state boards and departments have or will be taking related to groundwater contamination, please visit:
http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/publications_forms/publications/factsheets/docs/fs022013_state_actions.pdf

To see a fact sheet on the report, please visit:
http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/publications_forms/publications/factsheets/docs/fs022013_nitrates_rpt.pdf