



Media Release

Board updates SAFER Needs Assessment Report to guide state's drinking water support for communities

Analysis incorporates groundwater and financial challenges facing domestic wells and water systems

State's SAFER program provided more than \$758 million for planning and construction projects in 2022, and over \$21 million in technical assistance

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SACRAMENTO – Advancing its mission to ensure every Californian has safe and affordable drinking water, the State Water Resources Control Board released its third annual [Drinking Water Needs Assessment](#), which describes the overall health of the state's water systems and domestic wells and helps direct the funding and regulatory work of the [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience](#) (SAFER) drinking water program.

The report for the first time examines the causes behind chronically failing water systems and incorporates community level socioeconomic factors, including customers' ability to pay, into its analysis of the risks systems face.

The analysis and findings will guide where the State Water Board focuses its technical assistance and how it prioritizes funding in the 2023-2024 Fund Expenditure Plan, due to come before the board this fall. Across all its funding sources, the SAFER program provided more than \$758 million in 48 planning and construction projects in 2022, and over \$21 million in technical assistance. Thanks to increased infrastructure funding from the state's General Fund and the federal [Bipartisan Infrastructure Law](#), assistance for drinking water projects increased 150% from 2021.

In 2022, the SAFER program completed 27 water system [consolidations](#), with another 316 currently in the planning or funding stages. Since the SAFER program began in 2019, 94 consolidations have been completed, benefitting 56,000 people, and overall, 185 more water systems are providing safe drinking water, benefitting 1.2 million Californians.

"Our Needs Assessment helps us ground our technical support and funding decisions for drinking water solutions in solid data so we can target assistance to where it can have the most impact," said Darrin Polhemus, deputy director with the Division of Drinking Water. "Each year, we accumulate more lessons and data that enable us to add depth and sophistication to our SAFER program work. Our regular engagement with the public has been extremely valuable to updating our methodology so that our analysis stays relevant and can be used – and shared – as an effective tool for us to build sustainable solutions collectively."



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Key findings of the 2023 Needs Assessment are:

- Of the 3,053 water systems analyzed on January 1, 2023, 381 systems were listed as failing, meaning they do not meet one or more key [Human Right to Water](#) goals for providing safe, accessible or affordable drinking water and/or maintaining a sustainable water system. Collectively these failing systems serve approximately 787,000 people.
- At least half of failing water systems (or 5% of all public drinking water systems statewide) have consistently failed for three or more years. Ninety-seven percent of those have fewer than 3,300 connections, with the majority exceeding safe water quality levels for [primary contaminants](#) such as arsenic.
- Forty-two percent of the systems on the failing list are considering consolidation or are in the course of developing a long-term solution with SAFER [technical](#) and [funding](#) support. Consolidation with larger, high-capacity systems is one sustainable solution to help communities secure long-term access to safe drinking water.
- Of the 2,672 systems not on the failing list, 512 systems are at risk of failing due to water quality or shortage issues, their customers' inability to pay, or limited [technical, managerial or financial capacity](#). Collectively these at-risk systems serve approximately 1.3 million people.
- The report examines the risks that financial limitations of a customer base can pose, leaving some of these water systems unable to collect sufficient revenue to meet long-term operational and maintenance expenses or invest in necessary upgrades. Using an updated methodology that includes poverty and housing costs to assess community-level affordability, the report found that approximately 23% of systems that serve disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged communities face a medium-to-high affordability burden. In contrast, only about 9% of systems that serve non-disadvantaged communities do.
- [State small systems and domestic wells](#), which fall under county jurisdiction and are not regulated by the state, faced both water quality and water shortage risks in 2022, largely from dropping groundwater levels. The assessment incorporated socioeconomic indicators as well, finding that nearly one-fifth of state small systems and 28% of domestic wells were at risk of failing due to one or more of these factors.

Following the release of the 2022 Needs Assessment, SAFER program staff gathered public input during four workshops and incorporated the feedback into the methodologies for both the risk and affordability analyses. Staff also released three detailed and interactive online [dashboards](#) for the public to track and explore information about failing and at-risk water systems and domestic wells. The new and revised dashboards include water quality, water shortage, affordability, technical, financial and managerial data and are updated on an ongoing basis.

"It's said that you can't manage what you don't measure," said Jennifer Clary, California Director at Clean Water Action. "That was true for a very long time for small California communities. The Drinking Water Needs Assessment provides critical information about who lacks access to safe drinking water and why, as well as who is at risk of losing access in the future. It's an invaluable resource."

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 present and future generations.



The SAFER Program includes projects funded by the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, which is part of California Climate Investments, a statewide initiative that puts billions of Cap-and-Trade dollars to work reducing greenhouse gas emissions, strengthening the economy, and improving public health and the environment-particularly in disadvantaged communities.