



# Frequently Asked Questions

## The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) drinking water program

### What is the SAFER Program?

The [Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience \(SAFER\)](#) drinking water program is a set of tools, funding sources, and regulatory authorities used by [the State Water Resources Control Board](#) to help secure safe and affordable drinking water for all Californians, especially those in disadvantaged communities. (A [disadvantaged community is defined](#) as a region where the median household income (MHI) is less than 80% of the statewide MHI.) These communities often endure disproportionate environmental burdens caused by [climate](#), hydrology, and [historical disenfranchisement](#).

With the signing of [SB 200](#) in 2019, which created the [Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund](#), the governor and Legislature sought to ensure that Californians who lack access to safe and affordable drinking water receive it as quickly as possible, in line with [California's Human Right to Water](#). Thereafter the State Water Board launched the SAFER program to administer the drinking water fund and assist water systems and the communities they serve develop short- and long-term solutions to their drinking water problems. Ultimately, the program strives to assist water systems meet state and federal drinking water standards, become resilient to climate change, and provide drinking water at rates affordable to their customers.

SAFER actions are coordinated through the following offices and divisions of the board:

- The [Division of Drinking Water](#), which is responsible for enforcing federal and state drinking water statutes and regulating over 7,400 public water systems.
- The [Division of Financial Assistance](#), which awards state and federal grants and loans for drinking water projects that draw on funds from the [Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund](#), the [Drinking Water State Revolving Fund](#), and the [Clean Water State Revolving Fund](#)
- The [Office of Public Participation](#), which engages community members to assist and support effective involvement in the board's decisions and actions.

Through the use and sharing of [data](#) and the [SAFER Needs Assessment](#), SAFER staff proactively identify water systems at-risk of failing, prioritize and reach out to communities to assist them to develop short- and long-term solutions while collaborating through the SAFER funding application process.

Then, through funding, engagement support and technical expertise, SAFER staff help water systems and community members implement short- and long-term drinking water



solutions; assist them to upgrade water systems to more efficient modes of operation; provide operational and maintenance support until long-term sustainable solutions are in place; and, when necessary, provide long-term operation and maintenance support.

Driven by the effort of multiple partners with collective responsibility—water systems, non-profit organizations, counties and local authorities, community advisory boards, and others—the SAFER program strives to develop and implement voluntary solutions collaboratively. The board’s intention is to issue mandatory orders as a backstop to voluntary efforts when compliance standards are not being met.

### **What are the SAFER Program goals?**

The overarching goal of the SAFER Program is to help struggling water systems establish short- and long-term solutions so that Californians who lack safe, adequate, and affordable drinking water receive it as quickly as possible.

- 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.

### **Why is the SAFER Program necessary?**

Many disadvantaged communities are unable to deliver clean water for various reasons. Among these are human caused and naturally occurring [contaminants](#), [wells going dry](#), [lack of water system operators and managers](#), [shortage of revenue streams to pay for system maintenance and operation](#), or [governance and historical issues](#). Although state funding is generally available for drinking water infrastructure, state funds have not been routinely available for upgrades and operation and maintenance costs.

In the past, the lack of economic or technical resources alone prevented many communities from being able to complete the application process to access available funding. The SAFER program helps resolve this by engaging with failing water systems to address hurdles that prevent the provision of safe and affordable drinking water.

### Who needs the most help?

According to the annual [SAFER Needs Assessment](#), those water systems identified to be failing or at risk of failing are most likely to be small systems in rural areas serving disadvantaged communities. Specifically:

- More than 882,000 Californians are served by water systems that do not meet drinking water standards for contaminants such as [arsenic](#), [nitrates](#), and [1,2,3,-Trichloropropane](#). While the water currently served by these systems may be used for washing or other daily use, ingestion can increase health risks to children and adults. Several of these communities receive either bottled or hauled water through the SAFER program; the remainder must rely on more expensive alternative sources for their drinking water.
- More than 500 rural and small water systems with less than 100 connections face the greatest risk—these systems are unable to afford necessary upgrades or [consolidating](#) with another nearby more robust water system.

By contrast, more than 400 of California's largest systems (each providing for a population 10,000 people or more and serving more than 90 percent of the state's 40 million residents) have reliably 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 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 under-sink or whole house treatment systems ([point-of-use or point-of-entry](#)), and providing water directly to communities (e.g., [bottled water or hauled water](#)).

Ultimately, the goal of the SAFER program is for all of California's water systems to provide safe and affordable drinking water on a long-term basis. For many small water systems that are failing, long-term solutions will often require [consolidation](#) with larger systems, sometimes through regionalization projects, as well as the [training and development of locally based technical and managerial staff to run water systems](#).

### What are Operation and Maintenance costs?

Operation and maintenance costs are typically incurred by the following:

- Staff costs (management, administrative, operations, etc.)
- Financial services (bookkeeping, billing, accounting, auditing 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.

### **How does the State Water Board prioritize communities or projects?**

The board focuses on and distributes available funds to address water systems that are at risk or failing to achieve drinking water standards, and domestic well users in high-risk- areas.

#### **Public Water Systems**

Priority is given to consolidation or regionalization projects that can achieve long-term resiliency and sustainability for communities and 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 are required to include 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 connect disadvantaged communities without public water systems to larger public water systems, especially where there is 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 has the SAFER program achieved so far?**

Since its launch in 2019, the SAFER program has:

- Removed 204 water systems from the [Human Right to Water failing list](#), benefiting over 2 million Californians (as of November 2023).
- Completed 118 drinking water system consolidations, benefiting over 90,000 Californians, with another 255 consolidation projects currently in the funding or construction process.
- Provided \$620 million in drinking water grants to small and disadvantaged communities throughout the state.
- Distributed \$34 million for emergency repairs and bottled and hauled water deliveries.
- Funded 700 construction, planning, technical assistance, and operation and maintenance projects in approximately 450 communities.
- Provided \$50 million for technical assistance.

- Appointed eight administrators to guide systems' development of interim and long-term solutions, with nine more in the process of being appointed.

### **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.

### **Additional Resources**

More information on this Project can be found at [waterboards.ca.gov/safer](https://waterboards.ca.gov/safer).

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