Media Release

Testing program for PFAS expands to thousands of wells serving disadvantaged communities statewide

Widespread sampling is key to understanding how to address 'forever chemicals'

April 12, 2024 **Contact:** Blair Robertson – Information Officer

SACRAMENTO – The State Water Resources Control Board is expanding testing for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) to nearly 4,000 wells that supply drinking water to some of the poorest communities in California. The increase in testing is part of the Board's ongoing investigation of PFAS in groundwater near airports and industrial centers. The new data from these results will deepen understanding of PFAS, inform water treatment strategies, prompt public notification where PFAS are identified as a concern and protect public health in the years to come.

Over the last five years, the State Water Board has collected data on about 3,000 wells from community water systems in the vicinity of industries associated with PFAS use, pursuant to monitoring orders it issued to those systems in 2019. The board in March notified 1,190 public water systems in disadvantaged communities of new requirements to sample for PFAS and submit testing results. These systems may use free sampling services for the next two years with funding that Gov. Gavin Newsom and the Legislature appropriated in the Budget Act of 2022 for this purpose.

"The data we have collected over the past few years has provided us with valuable insights into PFAS and its potential impacts on California's groundwater," said Daniel Newton, assistant deputy director with the Division of Drinking Water. "Expanding on this work, the new testing program will give us a much more varied and detailed picture of PFAS from all parts of California by providing funding for testing in communities that would otherwise struggle to afford it, while broadening awareness of the problem with public notifications. Once we analyze the new data, we will have more clarity about how to address PFAS most effectively in the years and decades ahead."

Known as "forever chemicals" because they persist in the environment, PFAS is a group of more than 12,000 human-made substances that have been used for an array of commercial and industrial purposes and are a key ingredient in fire retardant foams used to fight chemical-related fires.

The health impacts for many of these substances are still being evaluated, but the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) has established a public health goal for two PFAS analytes, perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluoro octane sulfonic acid (PFOS), based on concentrations that would pose no significant health risk to people.

The state's public health goal and new wave of testing coincide with the release of federal drinking water standards for six PFAS. Known as a maximum contaminant level, or MCL, the national standard requires water systems to provide water that meets the standard to customers. Water systems must conduct monitoring for PFAS within three years and meet the new national drinking water standards within five years.

While California has not yet established its own MCL for any PFAS analytes, the board has four protective health advisories for four kinds of PFAS that establish response levels and notification levels to ensure transparency and protect human health. If a contaminant exceeds the response level in a system's water supply, the system must take the water source out of service, provide treatment, or notify customers in writing. If it exceeds the notification level, then the system must notify customers and conduct monitoring and assessment.

Water systems conducting PFAS testing under the expanded program must follow these protocols if the results exceed response or notification levels. The results can also be used to satisfy monitoring requirements under the new national standard.

People can be exposed to PFAS in numerous ways, including through food, food packaging, consumer products, house dust, and drinking water. Data the board has collected so far identify four potential sources of PFAS in drinking water -- fire training and response sites; industrial sites; landfills; and wastewater treatment plants and biosolids. Exposure through drinking water is a concern, as once it is in groundwater, PFAS are easily transported long distances and can contaminate drinking water wells and other sources of drinking water, including lakes and rivers.

The board will manage the new testing program in coordination with the Office of Water Programs at California State University, Sacramento, Babcock Laboratories and Geosyntec Consultants.

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 generation.