

Safer Drinking Water Solutions

Frequently Asked Questions

What is consolidation?

California's water utility network is fragmented and inefficient compared to other utilities. Currently, there are more than 7,400 individual drinking water systems, as compared to 900 centralized wastewater treatment systems and 75 energy utilities. Consolidation is a solution that can help many small water systems achieve sustainability. Consolidation is when two or more water systems are joined, physically or for managerial purposes. Consolidation increases efficiency, improves reliability, and may reduce the cost of delivering safe drinking water to rural or isolated communities.

- **In a typical physical consolidation**, a larger water system absorbs a smaller system. For example, a small mobile home park with its own water system no longer wishes to be responsible for providing drinking water. The mobile home park is near a city that agrees to provide water to the mobile home park through an interconnection. The mobile home park dissolves its water system and is no longer responsible for providing water. The city is considered the "receiving" system and the mobile home park is the "subsumed" system.
- **In a typical managerial consolidation**, a smaller water system becomes part of a larger system for all managerial purposes but continues to use its original water supply and distribution system. For example, a small community water system with an all-volunteer staff no longer wants to be responsible for the administration of its water system. The small system is too far from a large system to make it cost-effective to physically consolidate. The large system agrees to legally take over the management functions of the small system, such as regulatory reporting, billing, operations, etc., but continues to use the small systems existing infrastructure. The small water system dissolves and is no longer legally responsible for water service.

Consolidation is a form of water partnership. The State Water Board supports water partnerships whenever feasible. For more information, visit the following webpage: waterboards.ca.gov/drinking_water/certlic/drinkingwater/waterpartnership.html.

How will the Board determine if a smaller system should be consolidated with a nearby larger system?

The needs of the smaller system, based on drinking water violations and the smaller system's managerial and fiscal condition, are the first factor for consolidation. The next factor is the distance to a larger system. The size and the technical, managerial, and financial capacity of the larger system will also be considered.

How can the State Water Board assist with consolidation efforts?

The Board has several tools to assist with consolidation, including the following:

- Appointing and funding Administrators to run small failing systems and shepherd them to sustainability. Administrators may be assigned broad duties, such as acting as general manager, or very specific duties such as overseeing an infrastructure improvement project on behalf of the system.
- Directing technical assistance and providing funding for technical assistance providers.
- In the case of small systems with drinking water violations, the Board can order mandatory consolidations, but voluntary cooperative approaches are preferred.

Will the State Water Board evaluate if communities can afford their own drinking water treatment systems instead of consolidation?

The focus of the SAFER program is to ensure long-term viability and sustainability of drinking water systems. One of the most critical aspects of this is assessing the long-term technical, managerial, and financial capabilities of each system. The Division of Drinking Water will consider all solutions that help water systems provide a safe, accessible, and affordable supply of drinking water to communities.

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

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