

# 2026 SAFER Drinking Water Advisory Group Meeting #1

## Meeting Notes – March 12, 2026

### Overview

The Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) Advisory Group participated in the first quarterly meeting of 2026. The agenda included a presentation by the Division of Financial Assistance on the progress of the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Fund Expenditure Plan and a presentation by the Division of Drinking Water on quarterly updates on metrics for the SAFER program, which included details on the progression of SAFER funded projects. Advisory Group members engaged in questions and answers with Water Boards staff regarding the data presented, customer water rates affordability, navigating project barriers and timelines, and areas where Advisory group members can provide feedback on the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Fund Expenditure Plan.

Advisory Group members introduced themselves and provided background information on the drinking water issues their communities face. Water Boards Executive Director Eric Oppenheimer welcomed new Advisory Group members and highlighted SAFER accomplishments since SAFER began in 2019.

### Fund Expenditure Plan

Staff in the Division of Financial Assistance presented an overview of the current Fund Expenditure Plan, including recent progress and updates made from July-December 2025, and explained the timeline for drafting and reviewing the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Fund Expenditure Plan.

- The presentation included information on how funding is allocated to projects at various phases and how progress toward long-term solutions is being tracked.
- Staff provided high level statistics of how many systems are being supported by SAFER funding. It is estimated that about 4.5 million people are currently benefiting from SAFER funded projects.
- Staff explained funding targets for the Fiscal Year 2025-2026 Fund Expenditure Plan, which includes funding for administrators and support for operation and maintenance costs. Staff also provided domestic well funding updates and discussed how funding gaps are being addressed through SAFER and other coexisting programs.

Advisory Group Members engaged in a question-and-answer period regarding SAFER funding.

- The discussion focused on funding sources for the Fiscal Year 2026-2027, funding for administrators and domestic wells, how technical assistance funding works for different projects, and the timeline for Advisory Group members to offer feedback on the Fiscal Year 2026-2027 Fund Expenditure Plan given existing financial constraints.

### SAFER Program: Quarterly Updates and Announcements

Office of Public Engagement, Equity, and Tribal Affairs staff followed up on action items that came up during the Advisory Group meeting on December 11<sup>th</sup>, 2025, including updates on a SAFER project at Riverview Elementary School, and information on Senate Bill 131, AB 1207, and Senate Bill 840.

Division of Drinking Water staff also provided quarterly updates on metrics for SAFER projects occurring within the following categories:

- Projects within the original 2019 cohort, which included water systems that were identified as failing when SAFER was first established in 2019.
  - This cohort represents about 1 million Californians who were without safe drinking water.
  - By 2030, 90% of systems from the 2019 cohort are projected to return to compliance.
  - To date, 175 of the original 366 failing systems have returned to compliance, which represents 762,000 people who now have safe drinking water.
- Projects supporting water systems identified as failing between 2019 and 2025.
  - Staff have identified a goal of reducing the total time a water system is failing, so that failing systems are returned to compliance within 5 years. In order to meet this goal, additional administrative and technical assistance support may be needed.
- Consolidation projects that support California’s most vulnerable communities and schools.
  - Staff have a goal of implementing 20 water system consolidations per year to support smaller systems. Since 2019, 180 systems have been consolidated, impacting 362,000 people.

Advisory Group members engaged in a question-and-answer period regarding SAFER projects, potential barriers to project timelines, and community capacity to absorb rate increases as a result of consolidation projects.

- The Advisory Group advised staff to keep affordability and cost transparency in mind when developing project plans and emphasized the importance of community involvement.
- An Advisory Group member suggested using operation and maintenance funding opportunities more aggressively as a way to reduce the costs passed on to residents.

## Advisory Group Member Announcements

Advisory Group members shared brief announcements, highlighting updates, upcoming activities, and items of interest relevant to their communities and organizations.

- Advisory Group Member Irene Cacho extended an invitation to participate in the Health and Healing Spring Fair in Le Grand, CA on April 18<sup>th</sup>. This fair is an opportunity to provide education and resources about water and air quality to underserved community members.
- Advisory Group Member Angela Islas provided updates on SAFER projects occurring in Perry Colony, the City of San Joaquin, and in Five Points, California.
- Advisory Group Member Tequita Jefferson invited meeting participants to attend Leadership Council Advisory Board meetings in Pixley, California, to help ensure that the voices of small, rural communities are heard.

## Public Comment

The meeting included a public comment period, providing time for community members to share input and feedback.

- University of California Los Angeles research professor Yoram Cohen provided a brief summary of his work in providing distributed water treatment systems for small, disadvantaged communities, in Salinas, California. He will share reports on this work with the Advisory Group members

## State Water Board Next Steps

- Office of Public Engagement, Equity, and Tribal Affairs staff will follow up with Advisory Group members with a survey on agenda topics, upcoming Advisory Group meeting engagement, and tour location ideas for the fourth SAFER Advisory Group meeting in December.

## Advisory Group Attendance (P= present, A= absent)

Norma I. Amezcua (P)	Angela Islas (P)	Adam J. Rausch (P)
Irene Cacho (P)	Michael Knight (P)	Destiny Rodriguez (P)
Juan Cano (P)	Shannon Murphy (A)	Angela Ruiz-Alvarez (A)
Rosa Carrillo (P)	Soren Nelson (P)	James Sullivan (P)
Kristen Dobbin (P)	Wajiha Noor (P)	Maureen Thompson (P)
Tequita Jefferson (P)	Erick Orellana (A)	
Bruce Houdesheldt (P)	Timoteo Prado (P)	

## State Water Board Attendance

**Executive Director:** Eric Oppenheimer

**Division of Drinking Water:** Bryan Potter, Chad Fischer, Andrew Altevogt, Dan Wang

**Division of Financial Assistance:** Jeff Wetzel, Jasmine Oaxaca, Ileana Wald, Karmina Padgett,

**Office of Public Engagement, Equity and Tribal Affairs:** Adriana Renteria, Amelia Nishimura, Manuel Leon, Mandy Roman, Lacey Carlson, Alma López,

**Office of Chief Counsel:** Nicole DiCamillo, Anna Gard, Lauren Marshall

**Division of Water Quality:** Alice Kwok

**Communications Office:** Dimitri Stanich

**Office of Information Management and Analysis:** Lori Webber