

EPA: California not complying with Clean Water Act

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

California today was declared to be out of compliance with the federal Clean Water Act because it is sitting on \$455 million that should be spent to improve local drinking water systems.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency submitted the notice after years of fruitless efforts to get the state to document its spending under the program, said Jared Blumenfeld, regional administrator for the agency.

The program is administered on behalf of the EPA by the California Department of Public Health, using funds allocated by Congress. Typically the money is used by cities, counties and other local agencies to improve drinking water treatment systems, usually to remove harmful chemicals or seek a cleaner supply.

“We certainly hear from communities that they need the money and they are not being able to access it,” Blumenfeld said. “The facts speak for themselves. The money is not going out the door as quickly as it should be.”

Blumenfeld said the problem is not unique to California, but the scope of the problem is far larger in California than elsewhere. As an example, he noted the second largest similar problem exists in Texas, which sits on \$310 million in Clean Water Act funds. But Texas has provided the EPA with a satisfactory accounting of its spending under the program, unlike California.

A second problem, Blumenfeld said, is that when California does spend the money, it often chooses projects that are not “shovel ready.” So the money is allocated for a project, but

it remains parked for years.

“If you had reprogrammed (the money) more effectively, there could be short-term projects that are ready now that could already be funded, as opposed to funding projects that are not ready to start,” he said.

The Department of Public Health did not respond immediately to a request for comment.

The EPA is giving the state 60 days to submit a corrective action plan. If the state does not or the plan is not acceptable, the EPA may suspend payments to the state under the program.