

# Editorial: Don't let Clean Water Act money evaporate

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How hard is it to spend government money? Harder than you'd think.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sent a lashing letter to the California Department of Public Health last Friday declaring that the state agency is violating the Clean Water Act. Its major sin? Not spending federal money that should be going toward improving substandard water systems.

The state had \$455 million in clean-water money just sitting in the bank as of last October, according to the EPA. That cash, as part of the state's revolving loan fund, should be financing upgrades at waterworks. As users then repaid the money through their monthly bills, the money could in turn help other communities in need.

It's not that the state is wasting the money – frittering it away on systems that don't work or multi-layered bureaucratic reviews or conferences with \$14 catered muffins. Instead, the EPA said, the state has frequently committed the money to large water projects that are not “shovel-ready.” That leaves large sums essentially frozen for years while local water agencies do their work.

In the meantime, though, the money could be put to good use. Jared Blumenfeld, the EPA's regional chief, told The Associated Press that the state could instead finance water upgrades for small communities with pressing needs.

Many California farm communities struggle with contaminated groundwater, likely from agricultural runoff, but the rural

north state is also thick with rickety old water systems that have trouble meeting 21st-century standards and are overdue for improvements. Small towns rarely have the means locally to pay for this kind of work, so it stings to leave unspent federal money on the table.

Some state lawmakers, frustrated at the inability to muster action on vital water cleanups, were already pushing for change in the program. We'd hope the north state's representatives would join them. The administrative details are of little interest to anyone but water insiders, but the bottom-line need to spend water-quality money effectively – and, in this case, simply to spend it at all – ought to be self-evident.

As a reminder, though, the EPA's letter also highlights the coming wave of needed investments. The agency's most recent study says California will need an astonishing \$39 billion worth of water-quality improvements by 2026 – a thousand bucks per resident of the state. The disputed money here is a proverbial drop in the bucket, but it's a start.

You know, unless it just sits in the bank.