

Calif. considers charge to create safe water fund

By Tess Townsend, Water Deeply

Gaps in funding for water treatment are a major problem in California. Water providers operate independently, relying virtually entirely on customer fees to cover costs. For agencies with scale, money and access to quality water sources, this model works well. But absent those resources, contamination persists for years without resolution.

About half a million people in the state receive water from a system that is out of compliance with safe drinking water standards, according to a November analysis by PPIC Water Center. Most of those failing systems are small – serving just a few thousand or a even a few hundred residents. While state bonds and grants can help systems build treatment facilities, there's no state source of funding to subsidize ongoing operation costs for water providers that can't afford them.

A piece of legislation, introduced last year as Senate Bill 623 and later included as a trailer bill in the governor's proposed budget, seeks to solve this structural problem by raising a \$140 million annual Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, from a combination of charges on agriculture and residential water users. Money would go toward ongoing operation and maintenance costs for treatment in under-resourced districts. The charge on residential users would amount to about \$1 a month for most households served by the 1,000 or so agencies collecting fund revenue.

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