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State Water Resources Control Board

It Lacks the Urgency Necessary to Ensure That Failing Water Systems Receive Needed Assistance in a Timely Manner

Background

State law establishes a policy that every person has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes. The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) is responsible for administering safe drinking water programs, and part of its mission is to enhance the quality of California's water resources and drinking water and to ensure proper water resource allocation and efficient use. The State Water Board is also responsible to do the following:

- Enforce the federal and state Safe Drinking Water Acts.
- Monitor drinking water quality and establish maximum contaminant levels (MCLs) for more than 100 substances that are harmful to human health.
- Provide technical assistance to water systems.
- Award loan and grant funding for water infrastructure projects

Key Findings

- Nearly a million Californians face possible long-term, negative health outcomes—including an increased risk of liver and kidney problems, as well as cancer—because they receive unsafe drinking water from a failing water system.
- Although the State Water Board has funding available to help failing water systems, it has not made processing applications a priority. Over the past five years, the average amount of time it took for water systems to complete their applications and receive funding has nearly doubled from 17 months to 33 months.
- Although the State Water Board provides water systems with technical assistance to plan their improvements and apply for funds, it has not adequately monitored the performance of the technical assistance providers with which it contracts.
- The State Water Board conducts various outreach activities to raise awareness about its services, to help water systems identify potential drinking water solutions, and to keep projects on track by proactively identifying potential risks, issues, or delays. However, the board has not consistently conducted outreach to failing water systems, particularly to those that serve disadvantaged communities.

Key Recommendations

- The Legislature should amend state law to require the State Water Board to include its timeliness goals and its performance in comparison to those goals in its annual reports to the Legislature.
- To minimize the prolonged periods during which Californians suffer without safe drinking water, the State Water Board should make changes to its application process, particularly for failing water systems affecting a large number of people or serving a disadvantaged community, establish internal expectations and processes for application and project tracking and timeliness, and evaluate staffing assignment processes.
- The State Water Board should also do the following:
 - » Update its online search tool for funding applications to include additional information about processes and timing.
 - » Evaluate its progress in meeting its performance goals.
 - » Establish performance metrics and time frames for its review of technical assistance providers' deliverables.
 - » Work with the Legislature and federal agencies to request the resources necessary to ensure that water systems can meet safe drinking water standards.