

Dec 2, 2022

RE: Preserve Drought Resilience Funding and Prioritize the Human Right to Water in the Budget

Dear Governor Newsom, President Pro Tempore Atkins, Speaker Rendon, and Chairs Skinner and Ting,

Our organizations are writing to urge you to preserve the full allocation for drought resilience made in the 2022-23 Budget and to center equity in the state's drought response. California just completed its driest three-year period on record, as part of the trend towards increasing aridification punctuated by occasional wet years.¹ We applaud you and the Legislature for recognizing the scale of the emergency by allocating \$3.6 billion for drought response last year. Despite the slowing economy, it is paramount that the allocation be preserved in full.

People of color and low-income households are disproportionately burdened by climate change and drought. To protect the Human Right to Water, the state must focus its drought response on vulnerable communities and make every effort to ensure that water is affordable for low-income households.

Specifically, we urge the Administration and Legislature to take the following budgetary actions to protect and advance the Human Right to Water in California:

- **Fund Low-Income Water Rate Assistance**

California should prioritize funding a first-in-the-nation low-income water rate assistance program to help Californians pay their water bills and prevent water shutoffs. Adjusting for inflation, the average California household paid approximately 45% more per month for drinking water service in 2015 than in 2007.² Yet, unlike other utilities, such as gas and electricity, there is no statewide water assistance for low-income households. It is critical that we quickly address this severe gap in our social safety net by funding a Low-Income Water Rate Assistance Program.

- **Fund Drought Response And Resilience**

California must continue to provide and preserve funding for both drought-impacted water systems and households served by domestic wells. This funding must include resources for emergency response, including well replacement, hauled water, and other emergency projects, to ensure that access to drinking water is protected and/or promptly restored. As we address emergencies, California must also continue to provide funding to build drought resilience to avoid drinking water crises before they arise, including by implementing SB

¹ Department of Water Resources. 2022. Water Year 2022. <https://bit.ly/3OTzTc3>

² State Water Board. 2020. AB 401 Final Report. <https://bit.ly/3H39CGh>

552 (2021) and supporting drought-resilient water supplies such as wastewater recycling and stormwater capture.

- **Fund Water Efficiency Assistance for Low-Income Households**

Water efficiency is one of the most cost-effective ways to build community drought resilience, yet too often low-income households are unable to access traditional rebate programs, while those served by small water systems lack access to any kind of water conservation program. California should offer free programs to perform leak repair and install high-efficiency indoor devices to income-qualified households. We urge the State to fund a low-income water efficiency grant program out of the \$2.7 billion Drought Resilience and Response Package that the Department of Water Resources received in the 2022-23 budget. Of that, \$1.5 billion was reserved to spend after the end of the 2022-23 fiscal year and should be directed toward lowering water bills for low-income households and improving drought resilience for the communities they live in.

Given the severity of the drought, worsening climate crisis, and ongoing water inequities, we strongly urge the Governor and Legislature to maintain their commitment to drought resilience and to place equity at the center of those efforts.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to the undersigned representatives if you have any questions or would like to discuss our priorities further.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Clary, California Director
Clean Water Action

Kyle Jones, Policy & Legal Director
Community Water Center

Michael K. Claiborne, Directing Attorney
Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability

Lauren Ahkiam, Water Campaign Director
LAANE Water Campaign

Edward R. Osann, Senior Policy Analyst
Natural Resources Defense Council

Laura Feinstein, Sustainability Policy Director
SPUR

CC:

Office of the Governor, attn. Angela Pontes and Anthony Pham
Department of Water Resources, attn. Karla Nemeth and Kristopher Tjernell
The Honorable Wade Crowfoot, Secretary of Natural Resources
Senate Budget Committee, attn. Joanne Roy
Assembly Budget Committee, attn. Shy Forbes
The Honorable Senate President Pro Tempore Toni Atkins, attn. Kip Lippert
The Honorable Assembly Speaker Rendon, attn. Alf Brandt
The Honorable Buffy Wicks, attn. Zak Castillo-Krings and Ilaf Esuf