

For Immediate Release

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COVID-19 pandemic threatens water shutoffs, poses bottled water scarcity for vulnerable Californians

Over a dozen environmental and environmental justice organizations plead with California leaders for an immediate statewide moratorium on water shutoffs

SACRAMENTO, Calif. - Safe water advocates are sounding the alarm and urging immediate action to respond to the potential for water shutoffs for vulnerable Californians as the next monthly billing cycle approaches. This call comes as advocates working with many frontline communities with contaminated water also report that access to safe water alternatives like bottled water has been compromised as store shelves have been wiped bare over the last two weeks.

While clean water is a basic human right and paramount for public health, an estimated 1 million Californians currently lack access to safe drinking water. This public health crisis is now on the verge of being compounded by the current COVID-19 outbreak and the ensuing economic fallout. Vulnerable communities across California in both rural (like Tulare and Fresno Counties) and urban (like Los Angeles County) locations, who are largely low-income families and people of color, face the possibility of imminent disruption to their water service due to inability to pay. This threatens public safety and puts a rapidly growing number of families at risk who are struggling financially, and also threatens to undermine California's efforts to combat the spread of COVID-19 and protect our communities.

No less alarming, clean water advocates report that some communities with contaminated water are finding bottled water difficult to obtain in stores right now. This is forcing families to choose between drinking and cooking with contaminated water from their tap in order to comply with the Governor's shelter-in-place order, and being forced to travel much farther to find safe alternative drinking water sources.

Advocates are urging elected leaders to place an immediate statewide moratorium on water shutoffs and to take other immediate emergency steps to maintain and restore access to safe water in vulnerable communities.

California Governor Gavin Newsom's March 16, 2020 executive order (N-28-20) asks the California Public Utilities Commission to monitor measures taken by utility providers to place customer protections on utilities such as water. This is an important step, and many water utilities have already done the right thing voluntarily. But much more needs to be done to ensure both immediate and long-term access to clean water for all.

"How can we stop the spread of COVID-19 and protect our communities if people don't have access to clean water?" said **Susana De Anda, Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Community Water Center**, a non-profit agency that advocates for safe, clean, and affordable drinking water for all Californians. "We need immediate action -- including a statewide ban on

water shutoffs -- to make sure everyone has access to safe and clean water during this COVID-19 crisis, regardless of their zip code or financial situation.”

“A staggering number of Californians lack access to clean water, preventing them from following recommendations on how to protect themselves and stop the spread of this deadly virus,” said **Steve Fleischli, Senior Director for Water Initiatives & Senior Attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council**. “Our Governor has shown tremendous leadership during this crisis, but one of the most important next steps he can take is immediately ensuring all communities have access to safe water, regardless of their economic background or geographic location.”

“We applaud those utilities who have not only placed a moratorium on shutoffs during the pandemic, but which are turning the water back on for those whose water service was turned off prior to this crisis,” said **Jennifer Clary, Water Program Manager at Clean Water Action**. “Those who were struggling before this emergency hit need help even more now. We urge the governor to ensure that all residential water providers follow this example.”

“Over the last few weeks, we have all witnessed empty shelves where bottled water used to be stocked in grocery stores and corner markets,” said **Michael Claiborne, Senior Attorney with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability**. “For those with safe tap water, this is a mere inconvenience. For the hundreds of thousands of Californians who lack access to safe tap water, the bottled water shortage is a crisis. The state must act now to make emergency water supplies available to those who need them.”

“In the face of the public health threat that COVID-19 brings to communities across California, we must ensure that every household has access to safe and clean water,” said **Mary Creasman CEO of the California League of Conservation Voters**. “This is essential, and our elected officials should act swiftly in instituting a state-wide ban on water shutoffs. The lives of millions of Californians depend on it, and we cannot and must not fail them.”

“No Californian should be without water, especially in the midst of this public health crisis,” said **Chanell Fletcher, Executive Director of ClimatePlan**. “Handwashing is the primary tool to combat COVID-19; without water, simple tasks such as hand washing become impossible. We need a statewide ban on water shutoffs immediately to protect all Californians and stop the spread of this deadly virus.”

“During this unprecedented crisis, it is imperative for all Californians to have access to water to meet basic needs and protect public health,” said **Pablo Garza, CA Political Director, Ecosystems for Environmental Defense Fund**. “We appreciate Governor Newsom’s decisive action on numerous fronts and implore him to take this necessary step to protect the most vulnerable among us.”

“In times of crisis like the one we are facing today, no one should be worried about having their water turned off,” said **Adriana Sanchez Ochoa, Deputy Director, NextGen California**. “Water shut offs put vulnerable families at risk unnecessarily. We need to ensure that all Californians have access to safe and affordable drinking water no matter the circumstances that we are facing.”

“COVID-19 lays bare the longstanding economic and public health crisis too many California communities experience. It reminds us that when we care for the most vulnerable, we are all better off,” said **Chione Flegel, Managing Director at PolicyLink**. “Realizing California’s promise of a human right to safe and affordable water for all is not only a critical tool for

addressing the immediate public health crisis we face, it is a vital step to building a future where we all can thrive. We need to ban water shutoffs and ensure that every Californian has safe, affordable water.”

“Turning off the tap for families in need undermines California’s commitment to safe, affordable drinking water,” said **Sean Bothwell, Executive Director of the California Coastkeeper Alliance**. “A state-wide ban of water shutoffs is needed to make sure all reaches of government – from state and local agencies, to local water districts and utilities – actually work in service for the people of California, rather than harm them.”

"Protecting public health should be California's top priority. The state can't effectively protect against coronavirus if communities don't have water to wash their hands and clean their homes," said **Brandon Dawson, Policy Advocate for Sierra Club California**. "All families need access to clean water to help prevent the spread of this virus. Enacting a state-wide ban on water shutoffs will ensure that access."

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Community Water Center (CWC) believes all communities should have access to safe, clean, and affordable water. Founded in 2006, CWC works toward realizing the Human Right to Water for all Californians through education, organizing, and advocacy. **Web:** <https://www.communitywatercenter.org/>. **Twitter:** @CWaterC

Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability works alongside the most impacted communities to advocate for sound policy and eradicate injustice to secure equal access to opportunity regardless of wealth, race, income and place. We work with community leaders throughout the San Joaquin Valley and Eastern Coachella Valley on such issues as safe affordable drinking water, basic transit services, wastewater services, decent affordable housing, and the right to live free from industrial pollution with infrastructure that supports healthy lifestyles. Through co-powerment, organizing, litigation, policy advocacy, and research, we confront California's stark inequalities manifest in too many of California's low income communities and communities of color. **Twitter:** LCJandA **FB:** @lcjcalifornia **IG:** @leadership_counsel
Web: leadershipcounsel.org

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) is an international nonprofit environmental organization with more than 3 million members and online activists. Since 1970, our lawyers, scientists, and other environmental specialists have worked to protect the world's natural resources, public health, and the environment. NRDC has offices in New York City; Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles; San Francisco; Chicago; Bozeman, Montana; and Beijing. Visit us at www.nrdc.org and follow us on Twitter @NRDC

A Reed awardee grassroots non-profit, **Mi Familia Vota** is a national civic engagement organization that promotes social and economic justice through citizenship workshops, voter registration, and voter participation. Visit us at www.mifamiliavota.org and follow us on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook @MiFamiliaVota

The **California League of Conservation Voters (CLCV)** believes that radical change is necessary and only by transforming our political system will we create the opportunity to take bold action on climate change. CLCV elects and cultivates environmental champions, turns election victories into policy wins, holds lawmakers accountable, and builds political power for change. CLCV inspires hope and action and fights for equity and justice for all Californians.

CLCV is in the business of changing what's possible. Join us at www.ecovote.org and on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#). [See more press releases](#).

ClimatePlan is a network of over 50 California non-profit organizations committed to a healthier, more vital California that supports sustainable and equitable communities, preserves iconic landscapes, and significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions. ClimatePlan recognizes California has been shaped by a history of inequity, racism, oppression, and disinvestment. ClimatePlan uses equity and justice as an important lens on its transportation, land-use, housing, and climate work. Visit us at ClimatePlan.org and follow us on Twitter [@ClimatePlan](#).

Environmental Defense Fund (edf.org), a leading international nonprofit organization, creates transformational solutions to the most serious environmental problems. EDF links science, economics, law and innovative private-sector partnerships. Connect with us on [EDF Voices](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

American Rivers is a national river conservation organization whose mission is to protect wild rivers, restore damaged rivers, and conserve clean water for people and nature. American Rivers helps communities across the nation promote sustainable water use and equitable, resilient, innovative ways of managing drinking water, stormwater and wastewater to meet both community and ecosystem needs. Connect with us at [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

RCAC is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that provides training, technical and financial resources and advocacy so rural communities can achieve their goals and visions. In 2014, The California Endowment launched [Agua4All](#), a pilot project in partnership with RCAC, Community Water Center and Pueblo Unido CDC. This partnership raises awareness about California's drinking water crisis; builds community partnerships to install water bottle filling stations in schools and neighborhoods where they're needed most; identifies funding sources; and develops long-term solutions for California's water quality and access problems. Connect with us on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

NextGen Policy was originally founded in 2014 to focus on climate and environmental policy, in recent years it has broadened its scope to advance solutions to economic, environmental, and social justice. Specifically, our policy portfolio now encompasses topics such as: electric vehicles and renewable energy, criminal justice reform and immigration issues, healthcare and food insecurity, mental health and voting rights, student loan debt and the census, veterans issues and consumer protections, and affordable housing and environmental justice. For more, visit www.nextgenpolicy.org or follow us on Twitter [@NextGen_Policy](#).

Clean Water Action is a national nonprofit founded in 1972 to promote citizen engagement and action to protect our environment, health, economic well-being and community quality of life. Clean Water Action organizes strong grassroots groups and coalitions, and campaigns to solve environmental and community problems. For more information, visit our website at www.cleanwater.org or follow us on Twitter [@cleanh2oca](#).

The mission of **The Nature Conservancy** is to conserve the lands and waters on which all life depends. We have protected over 1.5 million acres of landscapes and 3.8 million acres of sea floor off our coast in California- habitats that are essential to the survival of nature and people. www.nature.org.

California Coastkeeper Alliance is a statewide voice for our waters. With the federal administration working against our environmental laws, CCKA defends and expands California's protective legislation and strengthens the function of our state water board. We represent local Waterkeepers, empower communities towards a #TrashFree2030, and advocate with companies through the Blue Business Council. Together, we fight for swimmable, fishable, and drinkable waters for Californians today – and for future generations. <https://cacoastkeeper.org/>.

Ceres is a sustainability nonprofit organization working with the most influential investors and companies to build leadership and drive solutions throughout the economy. Through powerful networks and advocacy, Ceres tackles the world's biggest sustainability challenges, including climate change, water scarcity and pollution, and inequitable workplaces.

<https://www.ceres.org/about-us>

PolicyLink is a national research and action institute advancing racial and economic equity by *Lifting Up What Works*.® Based in Oakland California we work to ensure that all people in America—particularly those who face the burdens of structural racism—participate in a just society, live in a healthy community of opportunity, and prosper in an equitable economy. We focus on advancing liberating policies for the 100 million people living in or near poverty, the majority of whom are people of color.

California ReLeaf is a statewide nonprofit that works to promote alliances among community-based groups, individuals, industry, and government agencies, encouraging each to contribute to the livability of our cities and the protection of our environment by planting and caring for trees. Our mission is to empower grassroots efforts and build strategic partnerships that preserve, protect, and enhance California's urban and community forests. Learn more at www.californiareleaf.org.

Sierra Club California is the legislative and regulatory advocacy arm of the 13 Sierra Club chapters in California, representing more than 500,000 members and supporters statewide. In addition to protecting every person's right to get outdoors and access the healing power of nature, the Sierra Club works to promote clean energy, safeguard the health of our communities, protect wildlife, and preserve our remaining wild places through grassroots activism, public education, lobbying, and legal action.

Audubon California mission is to restore and conserve natural ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife, and their habitats for the benefit of humanity and the earth's biological diversity.