COMMUNITY WATER CENTER
EL CENTRO COMUNITARIO POR EL AGUA
LEADERSHIP COUNSEL FOR JUSTICE & ACCOUNTABILITY
CLEAN WATER ACTION
CalCAN
CALIFORNIA CLIMATE & AGRICULTURE NETWORK
CleanEarth4Kids.org
PSR LA
Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles
CCEJN
Central California Environmental Justice Network
Self-Help Enterprises
PCL
Planning and Conservation League
CRPE
Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment
RESTORE THE DELTA
CALIFORNIA COASTKEEPER ALLIANCE
CMUA
CALIFORNIA MUNICIPAL UTILITIES ASSOCIATION
CENTRAL VALLEY SALINITY COALITION
CWA
CALIFORNIA WATER ASSOCIATION
CEH
ACWA
Association of California Water Agencies
DEFENDERS OF WILDLIFE
NCWA
Northern California Water Association
California Rice
It's in our Nature
NRDC
APEN ACTION
Nourish California
Irvine Ranch Water District
Union of Concerned Scientists
EAST BAY MUNICIPAL UTILITY DISTRICT
stewardship integrity respect teamwork
Pueblo Unido CDC
OF THE EASTERN COACHELLA VALLEY
Rancho Water
SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY WATER
Collaborative Action Program
UKIAH VALLEY WATER AUTHORITY
City of Ukiah
Sustainable Conservation

The Honorable Gavin Newsom
Governor
State of California

The Honorable Monique Limon
President pro Tempore
California State Senate

The Honorable Robert Rivas
Speaker of the Assembly
California State Assembly

The Honorable John Laird
Chair, Senate Budget Committee
California State Senate

The Honorable Jesse Gabriel
Chair, Assembly Budget Committee
California State Assembly

May 13, 2026

RE: Fully Funding The SAFER Drinking Water Program

Dear Governor Newsom, Pro Tem Limon, and Speaker Rivas:

We, the undersigned organizations, representing the environmental justice community, local and regional government entities, local water districts, and the regulated Industry **respectfully requests that the upcoming budget reactivate the General Fund backfill for the SAFER program.** We urge the Legislature and Governor to fully fund SAFER to its original $130 million annual allocation to help address pressing drinking water needs and long-term solutions.

The SAFER program is particularly unique and effective among Cap-and-Invest programs. Specifically, when the SAFER Program was originally established via SB 200 (Monning, 2019) to facilitate drinking water solutions, it was the only program with a general backfill provision among those funded by Cap-and-Trade (now Cap-and-Invest). This original backfill provision is still in statute (Health and Safety Code § 116766(g)) and highlights the recognized importance of stable funding for drinking water solutions. However, the recent Cap-and-Invest extension, SB 840 (2025), did not update the reference to the backfill provision statute. It is our understanding that during the recent Cap-and-Invest extension negotiations, the SAFER backfill provision was not discussed. Thus, the SAFER Program is now susceptible to significant volatility because it is entirely dependent on Cap-and-Invest auction revenues. That is contrary to the needs of a capital funding program, which requires stable revenues over a number of years to ensure successful projects.

When fully funded at the $130 million annual allocation, SAFER has been a remarkably successful program. Since SAFER began facilitating drinking water solutions, the number of Californians receiving unsafe drinking water from their public water systems has declined from about 1.6 million to approximately 600,000 in 6 years. This approximately 63% reduction is a testament to significant progress and a hallmark of a proven program that warrants continued public investment. Underfunding the SAFER Program below its original $130 million allocation will undermine California's recent historic strides in water justice led by Governor Newsom and the Legislature.

Such uncertainty undermines the program's goals and its effectiveness in advancing long-term drinking water solutions for vulnerable communities facing pressing water challenges. The Department of Finance's forecast in the January 2026 Budget Proposal project that, over the next four years, SAFER will face a reduction of nearly $100 million, including a 30% reduction for the coming year. Moreover, the California Air Resources Board's proposed regulations for the Cap-and-Invest program project that revenues will soon decline significantly and will never fully fund SAFER post-2030. Without the stability of a General Fund backfill, these shortfalls will significantly impede further progress toward safe drinking water access, as SAFER has been instrumental in facilitating projects in underserved communities. Notably, SAFER is one of the few consistent funding sources for technical assistance in communities that would otherwise have difficulty securing state and federal funding for drinking water solutions.

Our coalition appreciates your consideration and welcomes the opportunity to discuss further. However, **we urge the Legislature and Governor Newsom to prioritize and reactivate the general fund backfill for the SAFER Program in this year's budget.**

Sincerely,

Kelsey Hinton
Policy Director
Community Water Center

Jennifer Clary
California Director
Clean Water Action

Michael Claiborne
Directing Attorney
Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability

Jessi Snyder
Director
Self Help Enterprises

Brian Shobe
Policy Director
California Climate & Agriculture Network (CalCan)

Suzanne Hume
Educational Director & Founder
CleanEarth4Kids.org

Michael Rincon
Research and Policy Manager
Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles

Mathew Baker
Policy Director
Planning & Conservation League

Nayamin Martinez
Director
Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN)

Timothy A. Johnson
President & CEO
California Rice Commission

Natalia Ospina
Legal Director
Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment

Shannon Olivieri Hovis
Chief Strategy Officer
California Environmental Voters

Morgen Snyder
Director of Policy and Programs
Restore the Delta

Ashley Overhouse
Water Policy Advisor
Defenders of Wildlife

Arohi Sharma
Senior Policy Analyst
Natural Resources Defense Council

Madi Richards
Policy Manager
California Coastkeeper Alliance

Andrea Abergel
Director of Water
California Municipal Utility Association

Rachel Gray
Executive Director
Central Valley Salinity Coalition

Soren Nelson
Senior Policy Advocate
Association of California Water Agencies

Jennifer M. Capitolo
Executive Director
California Water Association

Katherine Chu
Legislative Director
Asian Pacific Environment Network (APEN) Action

Sarah Erlich
Attorney and Policy Advisor
Center for Environmental Health

Michelle Lee
Policy Advocate
Nourish California

Paul Cook
General Manager
Irvine Ranch Water District

Amanda Fencl, Ph.D
Climate Science Director
Union of Concerned Scientists

Sergio Carranza
Executive Director
Pueblo Unido CDC

Jason A. Martin
General Manager
Rancho California Water District

Ann Hayden & Sarah Woolf
Co-Chairs
San Joaquin Valley Water Collaborative Action Program

Jared Walker
Water Resources Director
City of Ukiah

Lauren Navarro
Policy Director
Sustainable Conservation

Clifford C. Chan
General Manager
East Bay Municipal Utility District

Kam Bezdek
Legislative Affairs Director
Northern California Water Association