

# THE FOOTHILLS SUN-GAZETTE

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## A bipartisan coalition holds press conference over drinking water standards and SB623

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By: THE FOOTHILLS Sun-Gazette

VISALIA – During the drought, water was tough to come by and everyone needed some. Now, a bipartisan coalition of residents, public administrators, nonprofits and politicians are coming together to gather legislative support for Senate Bill 623.

Introduced by Senator William Monning from Santa Cruz, SB 623 is intended to establish the Safe and Afforded to establish the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund to provide an ongoing source of funding ensure all Californians have access to safe drinking water.

According to a fact sheet handed out a coalition press conference last Wednesday on SB 623 the California State Water Board (SWB) has identified roughly 300 public water systems currently out of compliance. And since other sources of funding such as bond funding or the Safe Drinking Water State Revolving Fund do not qualify for operations and maintenance costs, there is a constant lack of adequate available funding for those things. Without that funding there is little rural communities can do to treat nitrates and other harmful chemicals out of their drinking water.

Those in the coalition includes California Citrus Mutual, Tulare County District One Supervisor Kuyler Crocker, city of Arvin Mayor Jose Gurrola, Cal Water, East Porterville for Water Justice, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, Matheny Treack Committee, Fresh Fruit Association, Poplar Community Services District and the AGUA Coalition.

Alyssa Houtby with CCM said those in attendance were a broad coalition of agriculture, environmental justice and elected officials. She said instead of blaming farming for nitrates, the coalition understands that groundwater is affected by both naturally occurring elements such as sulfur and arsenic, as well as man-made contaminants such as nitrates, a byproduct of fertilizer.

“Access to clean drinking water is a fundamental right but the legislature failed to deliver on this promise,” Coffee said. “Never in history have ag and environmental justice been able to come to an agreement. This is a historical precedent that we are setting here today.”

Pedro Hernandez, environmental justice non-profit said, “The last two weeks have been a call to arms for those who want to work together in this coalition.”

“It’s important that we help reach our goal of providing good, clean water to our disadvantaged communities,” Crocker said. “And we have more than our fair share of disadvantaged communities in the Valley.”

Gurrola, mayor of Arvin said, “This bill provides sustainable funding and permanent, long-term solutions for contaminated drinking water.”

The Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund will be located within the SWB in its Office of Sustainable Water Solutions. According to the legislation the fund, in consultation with a multi-disciplinary stakeholder group and after adoption of a fund implementation plan and needs assessment, will prioritize funding to focus on disadvantaged and low income domestic well users.

Mayor of Farmersville and community specialist with Self Help Enterprises, Paul Boyer said the State has exhausted previous funding under Proposition 1 and Proposition 84 to upgrade small, rural water systems in unincorporated communities.

"We can't just depend on state bonds because the funding doesn't always trickle down to disadvantaged communities. Boyer said nitrates make up about half of all groundwater contamination followed by arsenic, sulfur, uranium and lead.

Boyer said Self Help has been able to facilitate solutions in many of Tulare County's disadvantaged communities where residents have been dealing with contaminated groundwater. He said Tooleville is still in talks with City of Exeter to connect to its water system while El Rancho near Lindsay has already connected to the City's water system. Plainview, west of Strathmore, has been waiting three years for funding to improve its water system. Their water system is well over 60 years old and water meters have been installed.

"If this type of funding was available maybe things could've happened sooner for Plainview," Boyer said. "Who knows, the important thing is that if the bill passes it will create a permanent funding source for clean water projects."