

# PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE OF CALIFORNIA

## Tackling Safe Drinking Water in the San Joaquin Valley

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Unsafe drinking water is a significant problem in parts of California, especially in small, disadvantaged rural communities. We talked to Maria Herrera—a California water commissioner and community development manager at Self-Help Enterprises—about how to tackle this ongoing problem.

**PPIC:** What's behind California's safe drinking water problem?

**Maria Herrera:** Too many California residents still lack access to safe drinking water. In the San Joaquin Valley, drinking water delivered by small water systems and private domestic wells is contaminated by many natural and manmade contaminants. Typical water quality issues for valley communities are contamination from nitrate, arsenic, uranium and a chemical called 1,2,3-TCP. Small community systems and private well owners often don't have the resources to address these issues. They face a lot of challenges—for starters, they have little to no staff and lack the resources to maintain or upgrade aging infrastructure. Some rely on just one or two wells. Historically, these communities haven't been prioritized for state funding or in planning processes.



**PPIC:** How should we be tackling this problem?

**MH:** I grew up in communities experiencing these problems and have worked on these issues for more than 10 years, and I've seen a big shift in visibility over safe drinking water in recent years. California has taken a number of steps to address the problem, especially with the passage of the human-right-to-water law (AB 685), which makes it state policy that every Californian should have safe and affordable drinking water. That was the biggest signal that this issue is now being prioritized. Also, Proposition 1 prioritized safe drinking water in disadvantaged communities by increasing technical assistance funding and giving communities an opportunity to hire consultants to develop shovel-ready projects and fund safe drinking water projects.

We need to continue on that path in order to make these communities less vulnerable to drought. We need to not only fund mitigation of contaminated wells and treatment plants, but also help communities develop redundant water sources, promote consolidation of small systems to larger ones, and help them with drought contingency planning. Communities need guidance and technical assistance in order to develop solutions and participate in water planning.

This year California came close to establishing a safe drinking water fund, which would have created an ongoing fund for disadvantaged communities to improve their water infrastructure and clean up contamination. A safe drinking water fund is still a priority for drinking water advocates going forward.

**PPIC:** How might the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) affect the safe drinking water effort?

**MH:** SGMA creates a good opportunity for people to come together and identify ways to protect and improve drinking water supplies. But achieving sustainability will bring some tough decisions and will have some impact on agriculture. We want farmers to thrive—and rural communities to have adequate water supplies. SGMA provides groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs) an opportunity to play a very meaningful role in improving groundwater supplies. We'd like to work with GSAs and communities to develop joint solutions, improve coordination between GSAs and the agencies that work on water quality, and ensure that good information is available regarding groundwater supplies used by these communities. We'd like to encourage GSAs to look more

closely at domestic wells. We're trying to encourage them to develop more protections for vulnerable communities. Our ultimate objective is to ensure that rural communities have the information and resources they need to play a meaningful role in developing and implementing their groundwater sustainability plans.

**PPIC:** What gives you hope?

**MH:** I'm inspired by the interest of rural residents in building capacity and leadership skills to engage on water issues. There's a new generation of young adults that know the issues, have lived in impacted communities, and are now ready to make change in their communities by participating in water management and planning. I'm also energized by the partnerships we've helped establish between the communities, irrigation districts, cities, and agencies. It gives me hope that they are interested in finding common ground. And, I'm encouraged by the attention the issue is getting at the state level—the legislature, governor, the voters have all shown interest in funding propositions and programs that will help bring safe water to these communities.