

THE SUN-GAZETTE

New law lowers cost of clean water projects

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By: Staff

Gov. Newsom signs SB 974 exempting low-income communities from costly environmental reports on projects to improve water quality

TULARE COUNTY – When it comes to poor water quality, Tulare County is ground zero in the state.

Of the state's 300 water systems out of compliance with water quality standards, 10% are located in Tulare County affecting an estimated 100,000 people, according to the State Water Resources Control Board, more commonly known as the State Water Board. The communities cover every corner of the county from Allensworth to Lemon Cove and from Richgrove to London. Their water contains high levels of three primary contaminants: Nitrates, a chemical found in fertilizers; arsenic, a naturally occurring chemical that is tasteless and odorless; and Dibromochloropropane or DBCP, a pesticide used to kill agricultural pests in the past.

These rural communities lack the resources to solve their own water quality issues, which often entail multi-million-dollar projects to install a water treatment facility or drill a new well. The cost of those projects is compounded by environmental regulations under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). But a new law passed last month may offer some financial relief to rural communities hoping to one day draw potable water into their homes.

On Sept. 29, Gov. Gavin Newsom signed Senate Bill 974 to streamline the permitting process for low-income communities to deliver clean drinking water for residents. Authored by state Senator Melissa Hurtado (D-Sanger), the bill exempts new water projects that serve small, rural communities from some provisions of CEQA. The exemption offers low-income communities relief for the expensive and exhaustive permit process for small, disadvantaged community water systems with water contaminants beyond the state standard or failing wells.

"Today many hard-working families of the Southern Central Valley embrace the passage of this bill," Hurtado said in a statement released on Sept. 29. "The Governor's signature provides us with a glimpse of hope that when Democrats and Republicans work together we can deliver safe drinking water and create jobs for a region that needs it most."

To qualify for this CEQA exemption, projects would have to meet certain labor requirements and certain conditions, including fully mitigating all construction impacts and not affecting wetlands or sensitive habitat. The law also requires the lead agency to ensure the CEQA exemption would not disqualify the disadvantaged community from receiving any federal financial assistance. The bill sunsets on Jan. 1, 2028.

SB 974 is sponsored by Self-Help Enterprises and the Rural Community Assistance Corporation and enjoyed bipartisan support. Among the supporters were seven Tulare County water districts including Allensworth Community Services District, East Orosi Community Services District, Lemon Cove Sanitary District, Plainview Mutual Water Company, Richgrove Community Services District, Sultana Community Services District, and Yetttem-Seville Community Services District.

Last year, Senator Hurtado secured \$15 million in California's budget to fix failing Valley water systems in rural communities. The funds included \$2.5 million for a new water and tertiary treatment plant for Tulare County, \$1 million to replace a municipal well the city of Dinuba, \$1 million to repair water systems in places like Orosi, \$2.5 million to remove arsenic from water in communities, such as Alpaugh, and help bring them into compliance with state drinking water standards. Senator Hurtado won the reauthorization for that funding this year. In addition, Senator Hurtado fought for, and won, \$50 million in this year's budget to help Valley farmers comply with the Sustainable Groundwater Solutions Act.

"Access to clean drinking water is one of the main reasons why I chose to run for office," Hurtado said. "One million-plus people don't have access to safe, clean drinking water and this issue disproportionately affects my community, often keeping me up at night."