

KCRA 3

Audit says nearly 1 million in CA face long-term health issues due to unsafe drinking water

July 27, 2022

By: Hilda Flores & Michelle Bandur



SACRAMENTO, Calif. — A new report released by the California State Auditor says that nearly 1 million Californians could face long-term health issues after receiving unsafe drinking water, which could include liver and kidney damage along with an increased risk of cancer.

The audit also criticized the State Water Resources Control Board, saying it lacked the urgency to address the state's failing water systems.

According to the report, there were more than 370 failing water systems as of December 2021, which provide water to 920,000 people.

"Nearly 240 of these water systems have been failing for at least three years, and more than 150 have been failing for five years. Further, for 2022, the State Water Board's data show that an additional 432 water systems serving more than 1 million people are at risk of failing," the audit said.

The majority of the failed water systems were in disadvantaged communities in the Central Valley, with more people being impacted in San Joaquin, Stanislaus and Merced counties.

The audit said the State Water Board had not prioritized processing the water systems' funding applications to improve water quality, explaining that the average length of time for water systems to complete their applications and receive funding doubled over the last five years from 17 months — to 33 months.

Part of this trend, the audit says, is due to a change in state law that has allowed the State Water Board's focus to shift into helping smaller and less sophisticated water systems.

State Water Board staff say that working with smaller water systems helped to increase its application processing times.

However, the audit found that the State Water Board's "cumbersome application process, and its lack of sufficient communication and follow-up with water systems, are also contributing factors to funding delays."

The auditor's office made several recommendations to the State Water Board, which included streamlining its application process by no longer asking for "unnecessary application documents and financial information," developing a process to fast-track urgent water projects and developing metrics for benchmarks in the key phases of the application and funding process.

Acting State Auditor Michael Tilden said there shouldn't be failing water systems when the state legislature approved \$650 million dollars in 2021 specifically to clean up the contamination.

The audit found it can take years for water systems to get through the application and approval process. It found from the time a water board completes an application to the time it actually gets funding is nearly three years.

"Many water systems are very small and don't have the internal expertise to get through application process or take the right steps in terms of improving their water systems," Tilden said.

Tilden said the state water resources control board only has nine technicians to go through the thousands of applications.

The nonprofit Self Help Enterprises specifically works with water system board to help them navigate the process. Self Help represents nine counties in the San Joaquin Valley. There are many smaller, rural districts in disadvantaged communities that have been waiting for funding.

"We talk with people every day. We have great conversations. We have projects moving forward and then when it gets to the point of time to fund something, it can take a year or more to get a funding agreement in place and those are lots of days when people are drinking contaminated drinking water," said program director Jessi Snyder.