

Meeting Summary

Drought Resilience Interagency & Partners (DRIP) Collaborative

Water Infrastructure and Planning Workgroup Meeting II
California Natural Resources Agency, 715 P St, Sacramento, Room 06-212
June 18, 2025 | 3:00PM to 4:30PM

The meeting recording is available at: <https://youtu.be/eRFYX943Nlc>.

Meeting materials, including the presentation, are available at:
<http://www.water.ca.gov/drip>

Meeting Objective: Continue vetting and developing recommendation ideas proposed at the May 16, 2025 DRIP Collaborative meeting related to water infrastructure and understanding drought and water shortage impacts to vulnerable communities. Discuss other recommendation ideas raised during the meeting to decide how to undertake, potentially reconstruct, and develop them into draft recommendations.

Workgroup members in attendance:

- Emily Rooney, Agricultural Council of California
- Jason Colombini, Jay Colombini Ranch, Inc.
- Alvar Escriva-Bou, University of California Davis
- Laura Ramos, California Water Institute at Fresno State
- Katie Ruby, California Urban Water Agencies
- Carolina Hernandez, Los Angeles County Public Works

Absent

- Tim Worley, California Association of Mutual Water Companies
- Kyle Jones, Community Water Center
- Suzanne Pecci, Public Member

Brief Meeting Summary

The meeting focused on refining preliminary ideas from the May 16, 2025 DRIP Collaborative meeting into potential draft recommendations. Some ideas advanced, while others were revised, combined, or set aside pending further input. Additional ideas also emerged during discussion. Presentations from the State Water Board's SAFER program and the Department of Water Resource's Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool provided context on local water and infrastructure needs. The group also discussed how many recommendations to advance, with a suggestion to focus on two or three.

Existing Understanding and Data on Drought and Water Shortage Impacted Vulnerable Communities

Two presentations were given, one by State Water Board staff (Andrew Altevogt) on the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Program (SAFER program) and California Drinking Water Needs Assessment (Needs Assessment), and one by Department staff (Zoe Kanavas) on the Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool (WSV Tool).

- **SAFER program and Needs Assessment**

California has over 7,000 public water systems, including about 3,000 community systems with many serving fewer than 500 connections. These small water systems account for 90% of drinking water violations. The SAFER program addresses interconnected challenges of water quality, supply, and system capacity through six components: the Needs Assessment, Water System Support, Outreach and Engagement, Funding Sources, Regulatory Authorities, and the SAFER Advisory Group. The Needs Assessment covers four areas: failing systems list, risk assessment, cost assessment, and affordability. The risk assessment draws its data from EPA's Safe Drinking Water Information System (SDWIS), the DWR dry well database, and census information. Some infrastructure data is inconsistent, which the State Water Board aims to improve through new regulator authority over technical, managerial, and financial (TMF) capacity. Cost drivers for failing and at-risk water systems – estimated to exceed \$5 billion – include new public wells, physical consolidation, operations support, centralized treatment, managerial assistance, and interim assistance. For state smalls water systems and domestic wells, key cost drivers are new private wells, physical consolidation, and treatment. The affordability assessment evaluates whether these solutions are financially sustainable for communities, recognizing that unaffordable solutions are unlikely to be effective.

- **Water Shortage Vulnerability Score and Tool**

Background: Mandated by SB 552, the Water Shortage Vulnerability Score assesses the vulnerability to water supply shortages for rural communities including small water suppliers, non-transient systems serving schools, state small water systems, and domestic wells. There are two separate scoring systems; 1) small water systems and 2) domestic wells and state small water systems. Key indicators include projected climate change, current conditions and episodic events, infrastructure vulnerability, and observed shortages – with organizational capacity added for small systems. The Water Shortage Vulnerability Tool allows users to filter by county, system type, and water source, and provides system-specific details. The Tool was designed to be used by counties to inform their drought risk assessment and drought resilience plan development, both required by SB 552.

It was noted that the State Water Board and the Department use and share common data for the Needs Assessment and the Water Shortage Vulnerability Score. Other data, particularly related to groundwater, are being considered for alignment and integration.

Following the presentation, the workgroups discussed key takeaways and potential next steps. Highlights from the discussion are the following:

- Workgroup members appreciated learning about both efforts and the strong coordination between them.
- Acknowledgement that the burden of initiating consolidation of water systems often falls on public utilities. Although the SAFER program provides financial

assistance to offset costs, utilities still face significant challenges, particularly when the public utility is an investor-owned utility. A potential recommendation to broaden funding eligibility beyond the failing and at-risk systems to include public utilities that are proactive and prepared for consolidation projects.

- Members also briefly discussed recommending support for regional consolidation approaches, which, while requiring more coordination, may offer greater capacity for implementation in areas with many small systems.

Discuss and Refine Scope of Three Primary Ideas for Recommendation

At the May 16th DRIP Collaborative meeting, three ideas were identified for further exploration by the workgroup. The following states each idea and summarizes key discussion points from the meeting:

- **Identifying planning gaps and solutions for vulnerable communities**

Existing tools and data as presented above are used by counties to understand some of the systems in their boundaries. The discussion focused on how these data and tools could be used together to further prioritize support for vulnerable communities. While these tools already inform each other (e.g., SAFER scores feed into the WS Vulnerability Tool and vice versa), additional groundwater data could be aligned and integrated. Members suggested one recommendation be to proactively use this data to engage with vulnerable communities with practical resources, such as how-to guides, facilitation support, training, and regulatory support. There was also interest in reestablishing community forums, like those previously hosted by SAFER, to share drought resources and foster regional connections potentially looking towards similar existing forums to share drought resources.

- **Improve systems and regulatory flexibility**

The group discussed methods to enhance system flexibility for small-scale conveyance and intertie projects as well as multi-use infrastructure (e.g., flood control facilities for groundwater recharge). Members emphasized the need to make funding more accessible to small systems by increasing transparency around available programs, simplifying application processes, and identifying alternative sources such as philanthropic funding. Regulatory flexibility recommendations included streamlining approvals for broadly accepted infrastructure projects, expanding the use of water transfers and exchanges, and applying principles from recent habitat restoration permit streamlining effort (Cutting the Green Tape) to water infrastructure projects. [Note: Since this meeting, the State has passed a CEQA exemption for water infrastructure projects. For more information, here is a fact sheet from the Water Board: https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/grants_loans/sustainable_water_solutions/docs/sb974_fact_sheet.pdf.]

- **Groundwater recharge and Nature Based Solutions be included as new water sources**

Discussion began with an understanding of what actions we have currently taken place to recharge groundwater, particularly during the very wet water year of 2023, where executive orders (EO) helped expedite groundwater recharge. EOs helped move water quickly to locations for recharge, but landowners had to act swiftly to take advantage of opportunities for groundwater recharge. Members discussed the need for a more permanent, proactive framework to fund land preparation and infrastructure outside of emergency response. The Department's ongoing efforts to map potential recharge using AEM data could inform this work. The group also emphasized nature-based solutions, including designing floodplains to areas to help detain water for groundwater recharge or align infrastructure with natural water flow pathways. Members recommend prioritizing existing recharge projects providing environmental benefits, noting these are often overlooked despite helping sustain baseline groundwater flows.

Discuss and Refine Scope of Other Preliminary Ideas for Recommendations and How to Address Them

There was brief discussion on a few remaining ideas:

- Regarding the idea to develop green infrastructure investment plan intended for more fish and flows while identifying opportunities to remove non-beneficial water supply infrastructure, the term non-beneficial water supply infrastructure was not a familiar term to the workgroup members, and they agreed to seek further clarification from the DRIP Collaborative member who suggested the idea.
- Similarly, the idea to support regional/local water infrastructure long-term planning prompted a request to better define what infrastructure long-term planning means and to clarify with the DRIP Collaborative member who suggested the idea.
- There was a consensus that the workgroup should focus on developing three core recommendations, with other ideas folded into those.
- Lastly there was a request to share the revised recommendation template out to the workgroup members to seek how to develop ideas into draft recommendations.