March 19, 2021

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, U.S. Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515
The Honorable Dianne Feinstein  
U.S. Senator from California  
331 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510  

The Honorable Alex Padilla  
U.S. Senator from California  
B03 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510  

**RE: Include Urgently Needed Long-Term Low-Income Water Rate Assistance Funding and Investments for Water Infrastructure in Congressional Actions**  

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McCarthy, Senators Feinstein and Padilla, and Members of the California Congressional Delegation:  

Our organizations collectively represent both California frontline communities as well as over 500 California water agencies and other water and environmental stakeholders. We have come together to urge the California Congressional Delegation to include funding for urgent water infrastructure and water affordability needs as part of future Congressional legislation. We have advocated jointly since spring 2020 but our concern, and the level of need around water, have only grown. In 2021 we urge you to prioritize water as a core plank of Congressional actions to recover equitably and build back better.  

**COVID-19 impacts further highlight ongoing affordability needs.** California recently released results of its statewide water debt survey in January 2021 focusing on impacts from COVID-19 and found Californians are shouldering over $600 million in drinking water debt, along with $400 million in other utility debt tied to the water bill, affecting 1.6 million Californian households. The survey also found that low-income communities of color had disproportionately high levels of water debt related to the pandemic. Given the long road to recovery ahead, this survey is one important data point that helps highlight ongoing affordability needs. We do appreciate the inclusion of $638 million in the last COVID-19 relief bill and the $500 million in additional one-time water affordability funding that was included in the recent COVID-19 reconciliation bill. While they will not cover the entirety of the debt, these amounts will help customers partially address their unpaid water bills and get them on the road to recovery.  

**Water and wastewater agencies in both rural and urban communities across the country also need ongoing federal assistance to cover a projected annual need of $8 billion dollars.** Water rate assistance has long been an unmet need, and the pandemic has further highlighted the importance of long-term affordable water service. Similar to programs that are federally funded and support low-income electric rate assistance programs, ongoing funding is needed for a Low-Income Households Drinking Water and Wastewater Assistance/Affordability Program. In California alone, a report for the California legislature estimated the cost of an ongoing water
affordability program for drinking water needs is over $600 million per year.\(^1\) If that is extrapolated nationwide, and the program includes wastewater assistance as well, we conservatively estimate the need exceeding $8 billion per year for agencies in both rural and urban communities across the country.

**Water is also an economic engine for the nation.** Our nation’s water infrastructure is crumbling. A recent survey by the Council of Infrastructure Financing Authorities (CIFA), found more than $73 billion in current and prospective water infrastructure projects in various stages of development. Federal funding for water infrastructure has declined over the decades from 55% to less than 5%.\(^2\) Water projects can be found in every congressional district in the country. And a recent report by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) found that fully funding our water infrastructure needs would create nearly 800,000 new jobs by 2039.\(^3\)

**There is broad public support for water investments.** A recent poll found that 84% of voters support funding water systems for small towns and communities, while 79% support assistance to families struggling to pay water bills.\(^4\)

With this in mind, we urge you to include the following as part of any new federal water or infrastructure-related Congressional actions that is acted on:

1. $8 billion each year for 10 years ($80 billion in total) for long-term water affordability funding for grants to the states for a Low-Income Households Drinking Water and Wastewater Rate Assistance Program to help struggling households pay for essential water and wastewater service.
2. $100 billion in new funding over five years for Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds, with at least 20 percent of the new funding distributed to disadvantaged communities as additional subsidization (grants) rather than loans and eligibility for the new funding for all water systems, regardless of their organizational structure.

While not a comprehensive list of the actions our various organizations believe should be taken, nor of the elements we believe should be part of the funding described above, these represent meaningful and we believe necessary steps to meet the long-term drinking water needs of Californians while also boosting the economy and helping preserve access to safe, reliable and affordable water service.

We urge the California delegation to champion this issue in the coming weeks. We also encourage you to join your colleagues from the House Environmental Justice Taskforce and the Senate Environmental Justice Caucus as they push for provisions to support what Californians and the nation need to ensure long-term assistance for households across the country.

---

\(^1\) [https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/conservation_portal/assistance/docs/ab401_report.pdf](https://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/conservation_portal/assistance/docs/ab401_report.pdf)


\(^4\) [https://hubspotusercontent10.net/hubfs/6000718/Water%20Hub/Water%20Hub%20poll%20Aug.%202020.pdf](https://hubspotusercontent10.net/hubfs/6000718/Water%20Hub/Water%20Hub%20poll%20Aug.%202020.pdf)
We welcome the opportunity to brief you further on this urgent issue. For questions or to discuss further, please do not hesitate to reach out to Adriana Sanchez-Ochoa at NextGen California (adriana.sanchez-ochoa@nextgenamerica.org), Alesandra Najera at Water Foundation (anajera@waterfdn.org), Cindy Tuck at ACWA (cindyt@acwa.com), Danielle Blacet-Hyden at CMUA (dblacet@cmua.org), Emily Lam at SFPUC (emlam@sfwater.org), Jennifer Capitolo at the California Water Association (jcapitolo@calwaterassn.com), Jennifer Clary at Clean Water Action (jclary@cleanwater.org), Jonathan Nelson at Community Water Center (jose.nelson@communitywatercenter.org), Kalima Rose at PolicyLink (kalima@policylink.org), Phoebe Seaton at Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability (pseaton@leadershipcounsel.org), Sean Bothwell at California Coastkeeper Alliance (sbothwell@cacoastkeeper.org), and Tracy Quinn at NRDC (tquinn@nrdc.org).

Sincerely,

Allison Harvey Turner, CEO, Water Foundation
Anja Raudabaugh, CEO, Western United Dairymen
Araceli Palafox, Deputy Director, Lift To Rise
Ari Neumann, Community and Environmental Services Director, Rural Community Assistance Corporation
Arnold Sowell Jr., Executive Director, NextGen California
Aysha Massell, Director, California Integrated Water Systems, American Rivers
Betsy Reifsnider, Sacramento Policy Associate, Mono Lake Committee
Brandon Dawson, Policy Advocate, Sierra Club California
Bruce Reznik, Executive Director, Los Angeles Waterkeeper
Caroline Ferrell, Executive Director, Center for Race, Poverty & the Environment
Caryn Mandelbaum, Water Program Director, Environment Now
Casey Creamer, President/CEO, California Citrus Mutual
Chanell Fletcher, Executive Director, ClimatePlan
Christopher Sanchez, Policy Advocate, CHIRLA
Cindy Clark, Manager, California Policy, Ceres
Cindy Tuck, P.E., Deputy Executive Director for Government Relations, Association of California Water Agencies

Crisantema Gallardo, 99Rootz Director, Power California

Danielle Blacet-Hyden, Deputy Executive Director, California Municipal Utilities Association

David J. Guy, President, Northern California Water Association

DeAngelo Mack, Director of State Policy, Public Health Advocates

Dennis Nuxoll, Vice President, Federal Government Affairs, Western Growers

Dolores Huerta, Dolores Huerta Foundation

Don McEnhill, Executive Director, Russian Riverkeeper

Elizabeth Dougherty, Ph.D., Executive Director, Wholly H2O

Elizabeth Martin, Chief Executive Officer, Sierra Fund

Emily Rooney, President, Agricultural Council of California

Garry Brown, Founding Director, Orange County Coastkeeper/Inland Empire Waterkeeper/Coachella Valley Waterkeeper

Gary Link, Director of Public Policy, Western Region, Ducks Unlimited

Genoveva Islas, Founder & CEO, Cultiva la Salud

Gladys Limon, California Environmental Justice Alliance

Michael Carlin, Acting General Manager, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission

Jackie Rutheiser, Senior Policy Advocate, California Alliance of Child and Family Services

Jennifer Capitolo, Executive Director, California Water Association

Jennifer Clary, Water Programs Manager, Clean Water Action

Jennifer Kalt, Director, Humboldt Baykeeper

Jim Lindburg, Legislative Director, Friends Committee on Legislation of California

Jim Wunderman, President and CEO, Bay Area Council
Jonas Minton, Senior Water Policy Advisor, Planning & Conservation League

Jonathan Nelson, Policy Director, Community Water Center

Juan Altamirano, Associate Director of Policy, Audubon

Kalima Rose, Vice President for Strategic Initiatives, PolicyLink

Karen L. Bohlke, Director Government and External Relations, Martin Luther King Jr. Freedom Center

Kassandra Hishida, Coordinator, Community Alliance for Agroecology

Kira Redmond, Executive Director, Santa Barbara Channelkeeper

Luz Gallegos, Program Director, TODEC Legal Center

Margarita Rocha, Executive Director, Centro La Familia Advocacy Services

Mark E. Carlson, Lutherans Restoring Creation, California

Mary Creasman, CEO, California League of Conservation Voters

Mary-Ann Warmerdam, Senior Legislative Advocate, Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC)

Matt O'Malley, Executive Director & Managing Attorney, San Diego Coastkeeper

Melinda Booth, Executive Director, South Yuba River Citizens League; Yuba River Waterkeeper

Michael Rincon, Policy Researcher, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Los Angeles

Noe Paramo, Director of Sustainable Rural Communities Project and Legislative Advocate, California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation

Olivia Rodriguez, Resident, Thermal California

Phoebe Seaton, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director, Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability

Raul Barraza, General Manager, Arvin Community Services District

Regina Q. Banks, Executive Director, Lutheran Office of Public Policy – California

Ryan G. Sinclair PhD, MPH, Loma Linda University School of Public Health
Samuel Molina, CA State Director, Mi Familia Vota

Sean Bothwell, Executive Director, California Coastkeeper Alliance

Sergio Carranza, Executive Director, Pueblo Unido CDC

Shelley Luce, D. Env., President & CEO, Heal the Bay

Silvia Paz, Executive Director, Alianza

Steve Fleischli, Senior Director for Water Initiatives & Senior Attorney, Natural Resources Defense Council

Suguet Lopez, Executive Director, Lideres Campesinas

Thomas J. Collishaw, President/CEO, Self-Help Enterprises

Torri Estrada, Executive Director and Director of Policy, Carbon Cycle Institute

Valerie Nera, Policy Advocate, California Chamber of Commerce

Vanessa Moreno, Coachella Program Coordinator, Council of Mexican Federations in North America (COFEM)

Veronica Solis, Member, la Asociación de Gente Unida por el Agua (AGUA)

Veronica Tovar, Environmental Justice Program Manager, Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Stockton

CC:

- Members of the California Congressional Delegation
- The Honorable California Governor Gavin Newsom
- The Honorable Senate Pro Tem Toni Atkins, California State Senate
- The Honorable Speaker Anthony Rendon, California State Assembly
- The Honorable Secretary Jared Blumenfeld, California Environmental Protection Agency
- The Honorable Secretary Wade Crowfoot, California Natural Resources Agency
- The Honorable Director Mark Ghilarducci, Governor’s Office of Emergency Services
- The Honorable Board Chair E. Joaquin Esquivel, State Water Resources Control Board
- The Honorable Board Member Laurel Firestone, State Water Resources Control Board
- Deputy Cabinet Secretary Christine Hironaka, Governor’s Office
- Deputy Legislative Secretary Rachel Wagoner, Governor’s Office
- Deputy Secretary and Special Counsel for Water Policy Kristin Peer, California Environmental Protection Agency
Deputy Secretary for Environmental Justice, Tribal Affairs and Border Relations Yana Garcia, California Environmental Protection Agency
Central Valley Deputy Regional Director Maria Herrera, Governor’s Office External Affairs Executive Director Eileen Sobeck, State Water Resources Control Board