

AB 615 (Rendon)

Technical Assistance for Disadvantaged Communities

Issue

Disadvantaged and small communities throughout California suffer from a lack of resources and technical assistance needed to design and build sustainable and clean water projects. AB 615 builds on the governor's plan by clarifying the role of the Office of Sustainable Water Solutions (OSWS). The bill engages the CSU and the UC and develops their capacity to collaboratively address the unique water needs of the communities they are situated in.

Background

Today, in California, thousands of families do not have access to safe drinking water in their homes. According to the California Department of Public Health, public drinking water systems deliver water with unsafe levels of contaminants to approximately 1.5 million California residents every year. They may live in big cities or small towns, often with limited economic resources to improve water quality.

State agencies can provide federal and state funding to assist communities to improve water quality and drinking water supply infrastructure. Public funding, however, requires the applicant to have the "technical, managerial, and financial" ability to construct and operate the infrastructure. Small, disadvantaged communities often lack that capacity. Cultural and language barriers also may lead to inadvertent exclusion of these disadvantaged communities from many funding and assistance projects.

In recent years, the Legislature has taken action to help these disadvantaged communities. In 2013, state law established a "Human Right to Water," setting state policy "that every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes." In the 2014 water bond (Proposition 1), the Legislature allocated about \$145 million for disadvantaged communities, including specific funding (at least \$78 million) for "multidisciplinary" technical assistance programs.

The State Water Resources Control Board (Board), which now operates the State's safe drinking water program, has begun developing programs and projects to help disadvantaged communities. Additionally, the Governor's recent drought relief plan establishes the Office of

Sustainable Water Solutions (OSWS) to assist in the technical assistance effort as the state continues to adapt to drought. The Office is currently tasked with providing technical assistance that includes grant application assistance, outreach and education in vulnerable communities, financial management support, and facilitation of discussions within and between communities.

Given that each UC and CSU campus entails critical knowledge about their surrounding community's water needs and issues, there is much opportunity for their involvement in this Office. Additionally, each campus has important relationships, institutional support, and engineering capacity to actually address these water needs, so it is important that they are included in the conversation.

Legislation

AB 615 will expand on the current role of the Office of Sustainable Water Solutions, by engaging the UC and CSU. This bill encourages the OSWS to establish and oversee one or more "Center of Excellence" at the CSU and UC campuses, complementing the State Board's efforts by using localized capacity to accomplish state-wide goals. Each Center will be tasked with developing relationships within their surrounding communities, recognizing specific water needs, and strategizing ways to address them in an feasible and culturally-sensitive way. Each Center will use its respective diverse student and teacher base, trained in engineering and design, to provide technical assistance to the communities they are situated in. This will create an avenue for innovative knowledge to be used in a localized and practical way.

The overriding purpose of this bill is to provide safe drinking water for all Californians, by building on current programs and plans. Assemblymember Anthony Rendon looks forward to working with various stakeholders and interest groups to achieve this goal.

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