

Guide to Community Drinking Water Advocacy



**COMMUNITY
WATER CENTER**
EL CENTRO COMUNITARIO
POR EL AGUA

by Laurel Firestone

Produced with the support of the Rural Water Collaborative and funded in part by the California Wellness Foundation and the Women's Foundation of California.

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THIS IS NOT LEGAL ADVICE:

This Guide is not meant to serve in place of consulting an attorney on any individual legal issue. If you are concerned about a legal question, you should consult an attorney directly who can provide advice on your individual circumstances. Lists of legal advocacy and service providers are available in *Appendix 1*, as well as through your local court. Because laws do change, it is also important to check to see if changes have been made since this guide was published.

Acknowledgements

This Guide is many years in the making and is the result of the generous support, guidance, experience, and efforts of many individuals and organizations. It is based entirely on the knowledge and experiences that we, at the Community Water Center, have gained through the efforts of countless individuals working together in communities to fight for water justice. First and foremost, this Guide is dedicated to those, too numerous to list here, who have inspired and worked with us along the way.

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About the Community Water Center

The Community Water Center (CWC) seeks to ensure that all communities have access to safe, clean, and affordable water.

Our mission is to create community-driven water solutions through organizing, education, and advocacy in California's San Joaquin Valley.

The Center employs three primary strategies in order to accomplish our goals:

- Educate, organize, and provide legal assistance to low-income communities and communities of color facing local water challenges.
- Advocate for systemic change to address the root causes of unsafe drinking water in the San Joaquin Valley.
- Serve as a resource for information and expertise on community water challenges.

CWC Programs

The Community Water Center works directly with a number of low-income, primarily Latino communities to address problems that range from chronic drinking water contamination to barriers to participation in local water governance. These direct services provide the foundation for both of CWC's Programs:

Protecting Groundwater from the Ground Up

This program aims to improve groundwater used as a source of drinking water in the San Joaquin Valley. Our work focuses on the coordination and development of the AGUA coalition and its campaign for groundwater protection, particularly from sources of nitrate.

Water Democratization

This program aims to ensure communities have a voice in water planning and policy, and in decision-making that affects whether they have access to a reliable, affordable water supply. Our work focuses on engaging communities in water infrastructure planning and funding processes, and eliminating barriers to community participation.

About AGUA (Asociación de Gente Unida por el Agua)

Over 19 local community and advocacy groups founded AGUA in February of 2006 as a way to provide a unified voice for systemic change for water quality improvement within the San Joaquin Valley. Since then, AGUA has built a vibrant network of informed community representatives and nonprofit organizations, which act as a growing political force around water in the Valley. AGUA member advocacy has forced the Regional and State Water Quality Control Boards, county governments, and state agencies to recognize and address the issue of water quality impacts on rural, low-income communities. Susana De Anda, CWC's Co-Director, is the current Coordinator of the coalition.

To learn more about CWC, visit www.communitywatercenter.org or call (559)733-0219.

Introduction

Today, in California, hundreds of thousands of families do not have safe drinking water in their homes, schools, or work places. According to the California Department of Public Health, public drinking water systems deliver water with unsafe levels of contaminants to approximately one million California residents every year.¹ The vast majority of this tainted water flows to California's agricultural heartland – in little-known towns like Monterey Park Tract, Huron, East-Orosi, Cutler, and Alpaugh – where residents can't fill a glass of tap water without fear of cancer, kidney disease, and other health problems. These are some of our state's poorest towns, where annual median household incomes hover around \$18,000. But they pay some of the highest proportionate water rates in California – up to six percent of their median household income – for undrinkable water. Many rural residents drive 30 to 50 miles each week just to buy bottled water, effectively doubling the price for this basic need.

Despite these challenges, mothers and daughters and other ordinary community residents have organized to change this situation in their own communities. Mothers in Ducor forced their water board to clean up residential water that was black and smelled like sewage. Tooleville residents banded together to create their own water board and secure the funding necessary to drill a new well. After nearly a decade of receiving nitrate-contaminated water three months out of the year, Tonyville families convinced the state to issue a compliance order requiring that their water provider deliver potable water year-round. And Cutler-Orosi residents not only forced the rescission of unconstitutional ordinances discriminating against extended families – with literally 200 residents participating at local water board meetings and press conferences – but have pushed for language access policies that allow the mostly Spanish-speaking community to participate effectively in board meetings.

The Community Water Center was founded in 2006 to serve as a resource and catalyst for this growing movement. After years of working with communities on the ground and finding similar problems plaguing nearly all small, low-income rural communities, the founders felt that the problems were so large and complex that it would take a center dedicated to water justice to create the change needed.

Given the number of communities facing water challenges, the Center cannot work with every community directly. It is our hope that this Guide will help bring the expertise, tools, and experiences of CWC to all communities struggling for water justice. In this Guide, you will find information to help you answer commonly asked questions, such as what is in your drinking water, who is responsible for providing your water, and what your rights and responsibilities are regarding the water flowing from your tap. Additionally, the Guide includes stories of communities that have organized to address various types of water challenges, as well as handouts, fact sheets, templates, and other tools you can use to do similar work in your own community.

At the Community Water Center, we believe clean water is a human right, not a privilege. But to create a reality in which all communities have access to safe, clean, and affordable drinking water, we need your help. Using this Guide is the first step towards making that change. With information comes power. So use this Guide as a resource, pass it on to others, and start becoming part of the solution.

How to Use this Guide

If you are a community member concerned about your own water in your community:

Start by reading the *Getting Started* section at the beginning of this Guide. This short section provides answers to frequently asked questions and provides an overview of how to find out what is in your water and ways to hold your drinking water provider accountable. Each topic covered in the *Getting Started* section has references on where to find more comprehensive information in other sections of the Guide.

The *Getting Started* section also includes real stories of communities that have worked to address a wide variety of common challenges, from unsafe water to discriminatory ordinances. It also provides advice and guidance on how to organize to address community water challenges in your own community.

Use the *Legal Reference Guide* as a resource to get detailed information on specific topics as needed. The first part covers the federal and state Safe Drinking Water Acts, which are the laws that govern drinking water quality and apply to all water systems that serve at least 25 people or 15 connections at least 60 days of the year, regardless of the type of system you have. The second part gives an overview of the different types of water systems and the different laws that govern them.

The *Community Health Guide* provides one-page fact sheets on the most common drinking water contaminants in California, including what the health impacts are and what you can do to protect your family.

Finally, the *Appendices* have a number of useful tools. *Appendix 1* provides a list of places to get more information on a wide variety of topics. *Appendix 2* includes a variety of handouts or fact sheets, and *Appendix 3* has a variety of template letters and sample bylaws that you can use to advocate for improved water quality in your own community. *Appendix 4* has a list of all drinking water limits for every contaminant regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Acts, including maximum contaminant levels and public health goals.

Don't forget to use the *Glossary* at the beginning of this Guide to look up a term or acronym that you do not understand. Additionally, the *Index* at the end allows you to look up a given topic and find all the places it is discussed in the different sections of the Guide.

If you serve or are interested in serving on your local water board:

Use the first part of the *Legal Reference Guide* to learn more about water systems' specific legal responsibilities under the Safe Drinking Water Acts, including detailed water quality monitoring requirements.

Look up your type of water system and read about the other laws that apply to your board in the second part of the *Legal Reference Guide*.

The *Appendices* have additional useful information. *Appendix 1* provides a list of places to get more information on a wide variety of topics, including funding sources and technical assistance. *Appendix 2* includes a variety of handouts or fact sheets, including how to run a meeting, and *Appendix 3* holds a variety of sample bylaws and policies for small mutual water companies that you can use. *Appendix 4* has a list of all drinking water limits for every contaminant regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Acts, including maximum contaminant levels and public health goals.

Don't forget to use the *Glossary* at the beginning of this Guide to look up a term or acronym that you do not understand. Additionally, the *Index* at the end allows you to look up a given topic and find all the places it is discussed in different sections of the book.

The *Community Health Guide* contains information about particular contaminants, and the *Getting Started* section may also help provide an understanding of how your community's water system fits into the larger picture of drinking water in California.

If you are an advocacy or technical assistance organization interested in providing support for communities addressing local water challenges:

The *Getting Started* section can give you an overview of community water advocacy and the ways communities have approached specific individual challenges. Feel free to copy any part of this section and use it as a handout in trainings. Additional handouts and fact sheets are available in *Appendix 2*, and sample letters and templates can be found in *Appendix 3*. *Appendix 4* has a list of all drinking water limits for every contaminant regulated under the Safe Drinking Water Acts, including maximum contaminant levels and public health goals.

Use the *Legal Reference Guide* to look up specific issues that a particular community is facing, such as monitoring requirements or information on rate increases. Remember, the first part of the *Legal Reference Guide* covers the Safe Drinking Water Acts and applies to all water providers. The second part of the *Legal Reference Guide* covers laws that may differ depending on the type of water provider.

Use the *Community Health Guide* as a resource for health information and short-term solutions for common drinking water contaminants. Feel free to make copies and distribute them to the community.

All materials in the book are available in English or Spanish so please request translated copies if needed.

If you need more information on a topic or don't find what you are looking for:

Appendix 1 provides a list of places to get more in-depth information or assistance on many specific topics covered in the Guide. Additionally, you can visit www.communitywatercenter.org to check for updates or additions or call us at (559) 733-0219. We encourage you to look for local organizations that can provide advocacy, organizing, or technical assistance in your area. A list of California organizations providing these services is included in *Appendix 1*.