

EDITORIAL

*It's unacceptable that many Californians lack clean, safe water*BY THE SACRAMENTO BEE
EDITORIAL BOARD

Water is a basic necessity of life, but more than 1 million Californians lack access to clean, safe and affordable drinking water, says Gov. Gavin Newsom. Six million Californians receive their water from operators who have been fined for violating the state's clean water laws in recent years, according to a 2018 investigation by McClatchy.

"In many communities, people drink, shower, cook and wash dishes with

water containing excessive amounts of pollutants, including arsenic, nitrates and uranium," according to a Sacramento Bee story by Dale Kasler, Phillip Reese and Ryan Sabalow.

Many of those affected by the lack of safe water live in poorer and more rural areas, and a big portion of those communities are here in the Central Valley.

The lack of clean drinking water seems like the kind of public health crisis that leaders in 21st-century California would tackle

with urgency. An Environmental Working Group study released last month said that "toxic drinking water could lead to more than 15,000 lifetime cancer cases throughout the state," according to a story by The Sacramento Bee's Hannah Wiley.

Despite these grim facts, it's entirely possible the Legislature will fail to deliver on a clean water solution this year.

Everyone agrees Californians deserve safe and clean drinking water. They just disagree on how to fund the necessary

fixes. In January, Newsom proposed a "water tax" to establish a \$140 million-a-year stream of funding for projects and ongoing operations to provide clean water in affected communities.

A tax, however, requires a two-thirds vote in the Legislature to pass — a feat not even Gov. Jerry Brown managed to pull off. Newsom's proposal also encountered strong resistance, and a state Senate budget subcommittee rejected it last month.

Mustering legislative votes for a new tax is always a tough sell. But it's especially difficult when state coffers are brimming with billions of dollars in surplus funds.

Acknowledging the lack of support for a tax, a state Senate budget subcommittee has proposed moving ahead with funding for Senate Bill 200 by Carmel Democrat Bill

Monning. SB 200, in combination with the budget subcommittee's proposal, would allocate \$150 million a year from the general fund for clean water.

While tax revenues are streaming into the state's general fund at record levels, why not channel some of it towards this major public health crisis? What's the value of an overflowing rainy day fund when your people can't even drink the water from their taps?

If SB 200 passes along with the Senate budget proposal for funding, it would provide \$150 million for clean water starting on July 1. If, by chance, a future Legislature finds the ever-elusive votes for water taxes, they can be substituted in for the general fund money.

The question isn't whether the glass is half-empty or half-full. The question is whether the water in the glass is clean

or poisonous. For too many Californians, the latter is true.

The health and safety of millions of Californians hangs in the balance. We urge the governor and the state's legislative leaders to figure out what's actually possible and stop kicking the water can down the road.

After all, it's been seven years since California passed the Human Right to Water Act, which declares that everyone "has the right to safe, clean, affordable and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking and sanitary purposes."

Of course, the lofty law — one page long — did not provide any funding for clean water. The SB 200 package will remedy this, and will also allow state leaders to finally address California's lack of clean drinking water with the urgency the issue deserves.