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## CALIFORNIA TODAY

# *What's All This About a Water Tax?*

**By Jose A. Del Real**

May 13, 2019

*Good morning.*

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Gov. Gavin Newsom has made repairing hundreds of failing drinking-water systems in California a big priority since taking office, giving fresh momentum to an entrenched problem the state's leaders have long struggled to resolve.

But his proposed solution — a \$140 million yearly tax raised in part through fees on urban water districts — has raised eyebrows in a state where residents already feel overtaxed.

Toxic drinking water in California is a much larger problem than many people realize: From the coasts to the Central Valley, from Southern California to the northern reaches of the state, hundreds of public water systems regulated by the state do not meet safe drinking standards.

An estimated one million Californians are exposed to arsenic, nitrate or other chemicals in their drinking water as a result. (Yes, you read that correctly: one million people.)

The tax, which officials call a “fee,” would bring in \$110 million from water utilities and about \$30 million from the agriculture industry. The governor also intends to allocate \$168 million toward water infrastructure improvements, which is already paid for by a bond proposition passed last year.

Clean-water activists like the proposal because it establishes a source of sustained funding to improve water infrastructure and maintain healthy levels over time. They, and the governor's people, say it amounts to \$1 on everyone's water bill.

But critics argue that a proposed tax of any kind could backfire.

“Californians are concerned about the cost of living, and a proposed water tax is just adding to the cost of something that you have to have to live. We think it doesn't make sense to tax a resource that is essential,” said Cindy Tuck, deputy executive director for government relations at the Association of California Water Agencies.

The political dynamics in Sacramento around the issue are also fraught, even though virtually everyone agrees that access to drinking water is an important cause. Democrats have supermajorities in both chambers of the Legislature, but several of their gains came from traditionally Republican districts where a tax increase of any size could be deeply unpopular.

In the Senate, there have been efforts to use legislative budget actions to appropriate the funds without raising taxes. But it remains to be seen how the governor's office and the Legislature will sort out their differences in the weeks to come as lawmakers take the blueprint and make their markups. Mr. Newsom must sign the final budget by July 1.

State Senator Melissa Hurtado, a freshman lawmaker from the Central Valley who represents dozens of communities affected by lack of access to clean water, said she was grateful for Mr. Newsom's commitment to the issue.

But she has concerns. Like others, she is not sure a tax is political viable. Most notably, she is also highly skeptical of proposed budget language that would potentially exempt the agriculture industry from liability for pollution in the long turn. Chemicals from fertilizer and groundwater pumping on industrial farms is partly to blame for the tainted water.

"That raises a big flag for me," she said. "I just don't think this proposal would help my area. And I think it might end up hurting my area some more."

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