YOUR HUMAN RIGHT TO WATER:

A Drinking Water Guide For South Los Angeles

BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS

ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

• 2026 •

Acknowledgements

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Black Women for Wellness uplifts the truth that this country was built on the brutal enslaved labor of stolen African people, and we honor our histories and pay respect to our ancestors past, present and future.

We acknowledges the Grabrielino-Tongva Nation as the rightful stewards of the Los Angeles Basin. We recognize the indescribable harm they face as a result of the displacement, enslavement, broken treaties, and land theft.

Indigenous Water Protectors around the world have led the charge to defend Earth's water systems and teach us that we are all of water and must live in communion with water. Water is life. Though this guide is centered specifically around drinking water in South Los Angeles, many themes play out globally - so wherever you're reading from, thank you for taking the time to lean into our human connection to water.

About Black Women for Wellness

Black Women for Wellness (BWW) is a reproductive justice and human rights organization committed to the health and well-being of Black women and girls through education, research, empowerment, and advocacy. Since its founding in 1997, BWW has always believed in the strength and wisdom of our community and allies. BWW primarily works in Los Angeles County, with services also offered in Stockton in Northern California. Our programming and policy work aims to uplift the health of Black women, girls, our families, and our communities.

Black families in Los Angeles, and Black women in particular, are living at the intersection of reproductive injustice and environmental injustice. Los Angeles County has the third-largest Black population in the United States, and the largest on the west coast. BWW fights for reproductive justice for Black women in the region, whose reproductive health is disproportionately impacted by factors such as a high maternal mortality rate, and lack of access to high quality, culturally competent health care. Health disparities associated with these factors are worsened by ongoing environmental injustice, through which Black birthing people are negatively impacted by an over-exposure to toxic chemicals in their environments.

The Environmental Justice team at BWW works with and for the community we serve in South Los Angeles to build healthier communities by addressing issues caused and perpetuated by environmental racism. Our work seeks to address environmental hazards that disproportionately affect Black families such as neighborhood oil drilling, plastic pollution, water quality challenges, and exposure to toxic chemicals in personal and hair care products.

For more information about Black Women for Wellness:
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Introduction

At Black Women for Wellness, we are working towards water equity for South Los Angeles residents. Achieving water equity requires that everyone, especially those already overburdened, has water that is accessible, affordable, and of a high quality.

This comprehensive water guide is an updated version of our 2024 Water Guide, and is intended to offer South Los Angeles residents a single resource to access the information you deserve on your water. The guide is broken into 3 sections.

Section 1, Context and History of Our Drinking Water
This section presents a high-level overview of the systems and structures impeding water equity nationally and locally, illuminates the connection between reproductive justice and water, and digs into how climate change is so very connected to our water. Section 1 is intended to provide context and history to the issues you may be facing at home.

Section 2, What Can You Do?
This section focuses on what you, personally, can do if you have water concerns. Feel free to skip here for resources on low-income assistance programs in Los Angeles, choosing a water filter for your home, bottled water vs. tap water, and more!

Section 3, BWW's Work and South Los Angeles' Water Future
In this section you can read about our work and what we've learned from community members in South Los Angeles, and learn about ways that our built environment in South Los Angeles can be transformed to bring about a cleaner, healthier, and more resilient water future.

Photo credit: Black Women for Wellness.

The Connection Between Water and Reproductive Justice

As a human being, you have a right to affordable, accessible, and clean water. As a California resident, you live in the first state to recognize water as a human right - in 2012, the California Governor signed this right into law, where it is stated that "every human being has the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water adequate for human consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes." This is aligned with the United Nations' 2010 recognition of the right to water and sanitation as essential to the realization of all human rights.

Unfortunately, even though this right is cemented into state law, over 800,000 California residents lack access to clean water, and many are on the brink of losing access. Between our warming climate, environmental racism, and poor investment in water infrastructure, especially in low income and Black, Brown and Indigenous communities, there's much to be done to actualize your human right to water.

As a reproductive justice organization, Black Women for Wellness uplifts the relevance of access to clean water for Black birthing people and families of color.

In 2020, The National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF), In our Own Voice, The National Partnership for Women & Families, and The Sierra Club highlighted this reproductive justice connection when they released a report titled "Clean Water and Reproductive Justice: Lack of Access Harms Women of Color." In it, the authors highlight that access to clean water sits at the intersection of many compounding inequities faced by communities of color because water is foundational to support human life.

The reproductive justice tenets hold that all birthing people should have a right to have or not to have a child, to raise children in safe and healthy conditions

Photo credit: Jaimie Duplass, Shutterstock.

regardless of race or income, and to bodily autonomy. These rights are constantly being infringed upon by systemic racism and regressive policy. The Black maternal and infant mortality rate is more than 3x that of white women, and in the wake of the federal right to abortion being overturned in the Summer of 2022 by the United States Supreme Court, the majority of

Black Americans live in states with some of the most restrictive abortion bans. In January 2025, an executive order reinforced the Hyde Amendment which restricts federal funding for abortion services except in limited circumstances. At present we are all navigating a shifting reproductive justice landscape, with Black women disproportionately affected.

These and other realities plaguing Black Americans create generational harm that is worsened by water inequity. Imagine a parent being forced to choose between paying a water bill and buying food, a mother realizing they'd been unknowingly - and without fault - feeding contaminated water to their children, or a midwife without clean water trying to bring a new life into this world. Clean water is a human right, and is absolutely fundamental to both reproductive and environmental justice.

Throughout this guide, look out for our RJ Spotlights to learn more about this connection!

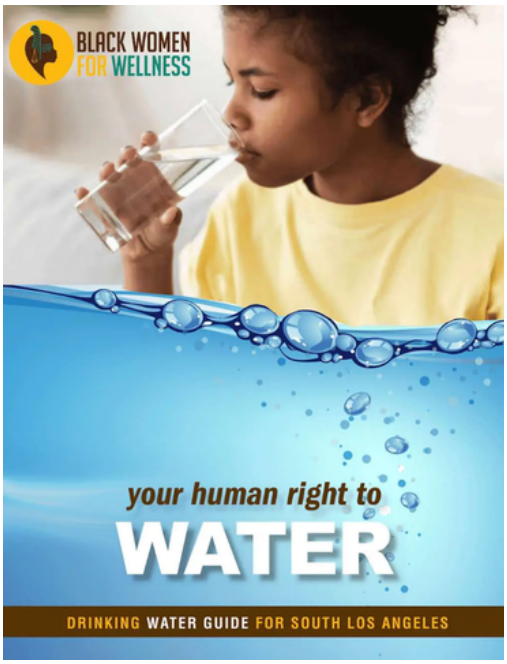
RJ Spotlight:
Access to safe drinking water is vital during pregnancy. Pregnant people are encouraged to keep up healthy water intake to help the formation of amniotic fluid that cushions the developing fetus, to support increased blood volume, and to maintain overall health.

2026 Water Guide: What Has Changed?

This 2026 edition of BWW's *A Drinking Water Guide for South Los Angeles* is an updated version of the guide that was first released in April 2024. The updated guide includes many major and minor changes! Some of these changes are detailed below:

- A brand new Section 3 has been added! This new section details a lot of the community insights we have gained at BWW through years of canvassing and community engagement. In addition, in this section you can read about the work that BWW is doing to transform our built environment in South Los Angeles to bring about a cleaner, healthier, and more resilient water future! This includes information about ways to update our water infrastructure through stormwater solutions and multi-benefit projects.
- Section 2 of our guide was updated to be more user friendly and streamlined. Since this section of the guide is designed to provide actionable advice to residents, each topic in this section is now differentiated with a helpful question - e.g. 'Is Financial Assistance Available for Water?', 'Should I Use a Water Filter at Home?'.

Since our 2024 water guide was released, BWW has hosted many community workshops providing education about water issues. Some of the insights we've heard from community members are detailed in the new Section 3. Photo credit: Sarahi Apaez, Blue Veil Films.



This is the cover page of the 2024 version of our guide, which many of you may have read previously! Source: Black Women for Wellness.

- A subsection was added to Section 2 titled 'Recent California News & Reports', for readers to explore 2025-2026 water-related news stories and studies.
- The graphics of our guide have been updated - the guide has a new layout, and many new photos and images have been added!
- Wherever relevant, statistics have been replaced with newer figures, and recent news stories relevant to our water in Los Angeles have been woven into the guide. For example:
  - Several RJ Spotlights have been updated, and a couple of new RJ Spotlights have been added.
  - Written text across the guide has been updated to reflect newer statistics, data, and reports - for example, Section 1 includes more information about recent California weather patterns, and the financial assistance programs listed in Section 2 have been updated.
  - Information about the 2025 Los Angeles wildfires has been added to the guide, with a focus on Altadena (see p9 and p16).
- Out of date links, facts, and resources have been either updated or removed from the guide.

Section 1: Context and History of our Drinking Water

Photo credit: Vibe Images, Shutterstock.

This section provides the history behind the systems and structures that impede water equity while highlighting their connection to reproductive justice and environmental justice. Read on for insight into the factors that lie behind some of the water issues that you may be facing, or just to learn more about where our water comes from, and its history!

Water Equity in the United States

The bottle on the left shows Flint's discolored water. Photo credit: Jake May, The Flint Journal.

In 2014, the nation looked toward Flint, Michigan as reports of contaminated drinking water mounted. Discolored, smelly water flowed into the homes of the overwhelmingly Black community, and despite the local government insisting the water was safe, over 9,000 children were exposed to lead-contaminated drinking water for 18 months.

In 2022, the water treatment facility in Jackson, Mississippi failed, leaving over 150,000 majority Black residents without safe drinking water. Even before this failure, residents were accustomed to being instructed to boil water before use, having little water pressure, and seeing brown water come through their taps - all due to the outdated water system.

Beyond Flint and Jackson, in 2016 public attention was captured by protests at the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, where Indigenous communities came together to fight against the Dakota Access Pipeline. These protestors self-described as Water Protectors, name that as well as threatening sacred Indigenous sites, oil pipelines damage the health of our water and prevent equitable access.

Here in South Los Angeles, California, water quality threats have also been documented. In 2018 tap water in the Sativa Water District in Compton turned brown due to a high level of manganese; and in 2024, an investigation led by the Better Watts Initiative identified high levels of lead in the water in public housing in Watts.

There are other water crises occurring across the nation, including PFAS, man-made chemicals that are highly toxic, in Georgia's water, arsenic in some New York City public housing complexes, and many communities without water all together. These reports make it clear that the United States' water systems are in need of an overhaul, and that people of color are facing the brunt of this environmental harm. The following pages outline five of the major factors that inhibit water equity nationwide.

RJ Spotlight:

Lead exposure in children can cause problems with growth, development, learning, hearing and speech, and more. Lead exposure can also cause reduced fertility in both men and women. Due to the impacts of racial segregation, Black children are more likely to experience lead contamination than white children.

Underinvestment in Infrastructure

US water infrastructure is made up of wastewater, stormwater, and drinking water services that are provided to homes and other entities. Wastewater is water that has been used already, and is sometimes referred to as sewage. This water is carried away from homes and businesses and might be treated and then discharged into natural water sources, or might be treated and then reused. Stormwater is water that comes from precipitation like rain or snow, and flows over streets and roofs into storm drains, either to be discharged elsewhere, or to be treated and reused.

This photo shows a Metropolitan Water District water treatment facility in La Verne, which filters contaminants before water reaches our taps. Photo credit: Zoe Cunliffe.

Drinking water is our focus in this report, and comes from rivers, lakes, and groundwater - some of this water must travel long distances to reach homes and businesses. Drinking water is transported, treated, and managed by an intricate network of aqueducts, pipes, pumps, facilities, and utilities that can be publicly or privately owned.

Every 4 years, the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) grades the US' infrastructure. Their most recent grades were given in 2025, and the US drinking water system received a C-, wastewater treatment plants received a D+, and stormwater systems received a D. These low grades reflect the current deficiencies in US's ability to upkeep aging infrastructure and leakages, decrease contaminants and inability to adapt to severe weather conditions. In 2023, it was determined that the nation's water infrastructure investment needs stand at a staggering $625 billion over 20 years.

RJ Spotlight:

Underinvestment in life-supporting resources is a common theme across reproductive justice issues. Across the US, maternity care deserts - areas that lack a single birthing facility or obstetric clinician - are becoming more common, with 35% of counties nationwide falling into this classification.

Environmental Racism

US investment in life-supporting water infrastructure has not met demand, but this is only part of the story - environmental racism creates complications beyond investment. This country was built on the genocide of Indigenous peoples and off the backs of the free and enslaved labor of stolen West Africans. This legacy of land and human abuse persists in our built environment. Race, even more than income, is the strongest predictor of the amount of environmental burden faced by a household. The urban and rural makeup of much of the Country is racially informed, and every decision - where to place homes, transportation, industrial zones, golf courses, schools, farms, city centers - are all also connected to water.

The toxic facilities pictured here are part of a predominantly Black area of Louisiana commonly referred to as 'Cancer Alley', due to its high number of chemical facilities. Photo credit: Julie Dermansky, DeSmog.

For instance, Black people are 75% more likely to live in communities near toxic facilities like chemical plants and oil refineries. Many toxic facilities like chemical plants are commonly placed near waterways. Such facilities often release chemicals into nearby water sources, and this can contaminate the nearby community's water supply. When natural disasters or accidents occur, this harm grows - for example, in May 2026 a ruptured crude oil pipeline in East Los Angeles resulted in 2,400 gallons of oil entering the Los Angeles River. Therefore, the decision about where to place toxic facilities is connected to both the racial makeup of communities and water.

Inequitable Affordability and Access

Water access is not experienced equally across the US. Black and Latine communities are 2x more likely than white communities to lack indoor plumbing, and Indigenous communities are 19x more likely to lack this basic human right. Because water access is a foundational element of health, this injustice is compounded by other social inequities facing communities of color in the United States. Namely, that Black communities are 3x more likely to face hunger than white communities, and Black households have a small fraction of the wealth that white households hold.

Even for households that do have access to water, affordability issues are a barrier to water equity. In 2024, it was estimated that as many as 19 million households across the country lack affordable access to water services. The costs of water are unevenly distributed, with communities of color more vulnerable to rising costs, and with low-income households frequently being charged higher water rates than affluent households.

Black communities have been disproportionately affected by failing infrastructure issues and their potential health fallouts, with historical disinvestment causing water supply issues in Black neighborhoods in Michigan, Mississippi, Ohio, and more. Black households also face higher rates of water shutoffs due to unpaid bills than other households, and reports have shown that such shutoffs last up to four times longer in majority-Black communities. In Los Angeles, analysis shows that majority-Black communities are nearly 2.5 times more likely to experience shutoffs than majority-white communities, and majority-Latine communities are 2 times more likely to experience shutoffs.

Rural farmworker communities, which are overwhelmingly Latine, are also disproportionately affected by water affordability concerns. Intensive agricultural practices in rural areas result in the widespread contamination of drinking water with nitrates and other polluting contaminants. This means that many Latine households in these low-income rural areas are forced to purchase bottled water for their families - but this comes with a high price, since bottled water can cost around $1400 per person each year.

Water Safety Concerns

Even water systems not officially deemed to be violating the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) standards might be afflicted with water quality issues due to regulations that haven't met need. The EPA regulates over 90 contaminants in drinking water. The list was drafted in 1974, and there have been subsequent additions made to the list of chemicals regulated, but it has not kept pace with scientific research and public health data. For instance, the agency only finalized their first national drinking water standards for 'forever chemicals' known as PFAS in 2024, despite there being decades of prior evidence about the health hazards of PFAS. 2026 data shows that 176 million people throughout the country have drinking water that has been contaminated by PFAS.

RJ Spotlight:

Many water contaminants are of particular concern to reproductive health, as pregnant people and babies are particularly vulnerable to associated health impacts. Nitrates, which often enter water supplies from agricultural processes, are an example of this. Studies have linked high nitrate exposure in adults to miscarriage; and for infants, nitrates in drinking water have also been linked to Sudden Infant Death (SIDS) and methemoglobinemia (commonly known as 'blue baby syndrome').

This is particularly worrying for Black and Latine communities, as research has shown that communities of color are susceptible to higher risks of adverse health outcomes compared to white populations, even at the same exposure levels.

January 2025 marked the beginning of the second Trump presidency and the start of fundamental changes to the United States' governance structures. The Trump's administration's environmental policies have significantly changed the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The administration has reversed and/or cancelled over $4 billion in environmental justice grants and disbursements intended for environmental justice regional offices. The administration also rolled back regulatory safeguards that promote better quality air, water, and power. Black people are more likely to live in communities with high risks of asthma, respiratory illnesses, and toxic industrial facilities. With these communities already overburdened by environmental harms, the rollback of these safeguards and the decrease in funding exacerbates environmental concerns, and have the potential to significantly increase health risks.

Climate Change Impacts

The Earth's climate is warming due to continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels and a profit over people mentality. This is causing myriads of devastating effects on human health such as an increase in the severity and occurrence of natural disasters, more extreme heat events, disease outbreaks and namely, water scarcity and sea level rise.

The effects of climate change put further pressure on already belabored water systems across the US. The changing environment makes water supply more unpredictable than ever. Weather extremes across the country are becoming more common, with both flooding and droughts becoming more frequent - in spring 2026, more than 60% of the country was facing drought conditions. This means that water supplies can be erratic and unpredictable, putting pressure on water systems because more complex and more expensive ways of managing water are required.

Photo credit: STAND LA Coalition

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One impact of climate change experienced in Los Angeles is the increased risk of wildfires. As recently

as January 2025, Los Angeles, California was impacted by a series of fires that forced over 200,000 residents to evacuate from their homes. Altadena, a historically Black community in eastern Los Angeles, had over 6,000 homes, schools and businesses destroyed by the Eaton fire, and 19 residents lost their lives. The devastation of the fire left many Black Altadena residents displaced and some of the water supply contaminated. Many impacted water suppliers serve areas with a high proportion of Black residents. As recovery is ongoing, Los Angeles is tasked with addressing the current water inequity facing members of its Black population.

In addition, the rising levels of pollution that fuel climate change also cause problems for water systems because pollution can contaminate local drinking water sources through air emissions, and also through wastewater and stormwater. It is expensive to remove these contaminants from water supplies effectively, so this can cause raised water prices for consumers. Furthermore, regulations that are supposed to mitigate pollution and protect our water are poorly enforced across the board, but inequitably enforced in communities of color - penalties applied to polluters are 5x greater in white communities than they are in communities of color for comparable violations.

Summary: Barriers to Water Equity across the United States

The US has massively underinvested in water infrastructure, which is having far reaching consequences especially on Black communities.

Environmental racism is the reality that race is the most reliable predictor of the amount of environmental burden faced by a community.

Black, Latine, and Indigenous communities are more likely than their white counterparts to be without indoor plumbing, and these populations also often pay more for water.

Treating our water and maintaining water systems is highly complex - these systems lack adequate investment, so millions of Americans do not have safe and clean tap water.

Climate change is negatively impacting the entire landscape of water affordability, access, and safety. As the Earth warms due to human actions, drinking water becomes more scarce and can be contaminated by natural disasters and pollution, all of which puts a strain on already under-resourced water systems.

Water Equity in California and South Los Angeles

While it is important to have a bird's eye view of the water concerns facing the nation today, as a Southern California resident, it's critical that you have access to the information you deserve on your local water. The next few pages of the guide focus on water equity in California and in South Los Angeles. Read on for recent updates on local water issues, a brief history of water in California, information on water laws specific to the state, and learn where our water in South Los Angeles comes from, as well as who is supplying it.

California has a complex water landscape, partly because of the unique and challenging climate, but largely because this state's economic and population growth is intrinsically tied to colonialism and questions of who has a right to which water sources. If you are a local, you've probably experienced the phenomenon of 'climate whiplash,' where years of extreme drought are followed by years of incredibly heavy rainfall. For example, in early 2025 Los Angeles was experiencing its second-driest period in almost 150 years, fueling the destructive wildfires in Altadena and the Palisades; and yet by December 2025, so much rain had fallen that California as a state was entirely drought free.

This image shows two water reservoirs that were dry after being damaged in the Eaton Fire in Altadena. Photo credit: Myung J. Chun.

These photos show the same Californian water reservoir - the left image was taken during a drought, and the right image was taken in 2023 after heavy rainfall. Photo credit: Justin Sullivan.

Although California has strict water regulation laws, and water safety and affordability are more of a priority to state and local governments than they are in much of the country, the state has a long way to go before water equity can be achieved. In 2025, over 2.5 million California residents were served by water systems that were either failing or at risk; and over 50% of water systems that were failing served majority communities of color. In Los Angeles itself, South Los Angeles and its primarily Black and Brown people are particularly affected.

RJ Spotlight:

California is a reproductive rights leader in many respects - the State constitution protects the right to an abortion, and BWW helped pass a law that even bans insurance companies from charging co-payments for this medical service. In addition, Medi-Cal recipients have access to midwifery and doula care. And finally, it is mandated that perinatal providers must take implicit bias training. While there is much to do - especially to protect Black women - much has been achieved!

A Brief History of Water in California

The history of water and water rights in California is a violent, racist, and exclusionary one, in which Indigenous groups and communities of color have lost out; this history informs water management in Los Angeles to this day.

Before Spanish colonies were established in California in the 18th century, nomadic Indigenous groups inhabited the land for at least 10,000 years. In Southern California, these groups included the Ventureño Chumash, Fernandeño Tataviam, and Gabrielino-Tongva peoples. By 1500, semi-permanent villages were established along the 51 mile-long waterway now known as the Los Angeles River, which moved into and out of use in line with water conditions throughout the basin. Indigenous peoples across the state were displaced and enslaved by Spanish colonizers, and in the years that followed, have been oppressed by government policies of settler colonialism. Through the 1800s, the California Legislature passed laws that sanctioned the indentured servitude and separation of children from families, and also funded militias to carry out programs of genocide against Indigenous people.

Image credit: Samantha Morales Johnson.

In the following years, large swaths of the land that was stolen from Indigenous people were repurposed for large-scale agricultural use, especially in California's Central Valley, which encompasses the San Joaquin Valley and the Sacramento Valley. In these farmlands, Indigenous cultural practices of living in reciprocity with the land and with its water were ignored entirely - settlers did not employ regenerative techniques, and consequently drained the soil of nutrients within a few decades. This led to a boom of intensive farming, particularly of fruit and cotton; between the mid 1800s and the 1920s the number of farms in the state increased by 700%. Intensive farming has hindered water equity in California ever since, for two major reasons. First, it uses a lot of water in a region where water is scarce; and second, intensive farming generates incredibly high levels of pollution, which affects drinking water since it involves the heavy use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers. This is why in the present day, the majority of failing water systems are found in low-income and primarily Latine communities in the Central Valley, where 75% of California's agricultural farming occurs.

The explosion of California's population in the 20th century led to further crimes regarding water acquisition and usage. Between 1900 and 1950, California's population grew from 2 million up to 10 million; it then more than tripled by 2000; and now, more US residents live in California than in any other state in the country. This expanding population required more and more water, and this water was often obtained through unsavory means. Perhaps the best example of this is Los Angeles Department of Water and Power's (LADWP) 1913 project to supplement local water supplies in Los Angeles by diverting water from the Owens Valley 250 miles away. The city acquired this water through deceit, as private individuals posed as farmers and ranchers in order to make land purchases that would ultimately cede the Owen Valley's water rights to LADWP. This deceitful water rights acquisition by Los Angeles officials also exploited and displaced the Indigenous Paiute people, who have lived in the area for

thousands of years. With this water diversion in place, Owens Lake - the area's major body of water - completely dried up, and the resulting dust bowl created significant and hazardous levels of air pollution. By 2013, the dry lakebed was the largest single source of dust pollution in the US, and LADWP has subsequently been forced to spend over $2.5 billion to reduce dust emissions.

This image shows the Los Angeles Aqueduct, which to this day transports water from the Owens Valley to Los Angeles. Photo credit: Damian Dovarganes.

In recent decades, injustices in California's water history have continued. Through much of the 20th century, discriminatory property laws and broader systems of discrimination excluded Black and Latine communities from owning or residing on land near water. For example, in 1950, there were over 50,000 Black Americans in the San Joaquin Valley, yet racist laws and policies pushed these Black farm workers to arid outskirts of the farmland - areas where people of color could acquire property precisely because no water was available, and where White residents had fled for this reason. These exclusions created layers of disadvantage that persist to the present day. A study released in early 2023 shows that 86% of water rights in the state and 91% of individual water rights are controlled by white people, giving people of color little to no say over water planning processes.

Water Governance and Important California Laws

Our water in California is subject to legislative regulation on both the federal and state levels.

At the federal level, the two major laws of note are the Clean Water Act of 1972 and the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974, which established basic water standards that could be regulated by the EPA. The Clean Water Act regulates industrial and municipal sources of pollution, prohibiting the discharge of pollutants into US waterways without appropriate permits. The Safe Drinking Water Act set minimum standards to protect tap water, by requiring state and local water suppliers to remove or lessen the presence of certain contaminants in public drinking water.

In California specifically, the Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act of 1986 (Prop 65) protects the state's drinking water supplies from being contaminated with chemicals known to cause cancer, birth defects, or other reproductive harms. In 2012, California became the only state to formally recognize a Human Right to Water, which has improved the state's ability to respond to various drinking water crises. In the past decade, the state has introduced legislation that aims, among other things, to consolidate failing water utilities, regulate groundwater pumping, provide due process prior to shutoffs, and provide drought mitigation resources to small and rural water systems.

Photo credit: California Coastkeeper Alliance.

In California, the body responsible for implementing and enforcing water regulations is CalEPA, the California Environmental Protection Agency. CalEPA oversees the State Water Board, which has authority over water allocation and water quality protection throughout the state. There are also nine Regional Boards that manage water concerns in relation to local differences in climate and topography. Regional Board 4 oversees Los Angeles and Ventura counties. However, in California and also nationwide, a 2025 study demonstrates that counties with higher Black and Latine populations experience slower enforcement of federal water laws than majority white counties.

The situation is particularly complex in Los Angeles. While CalEPA is the city's largest regulator, Los Angeles' water management system is extremely complex because there are multiple regulatory bodies that bear responsibility for overseeing different aspects of Los Angeles' water systems. For example, different bodies oversee publicly and privately owned water utilities, and entirely different management bodies often regulate water sources themselves. This means that it is very difficult to reform Los Angeles' water management and secure water equity for South Los Angeles, since so many layers of governing bodies are involved.

Where Does Our Water in South Los Angeles Come From?

Water rates in South Los Angeles are some of the highest in California, and historically, some areas in South Los Angeles have experienced more water quality issues than other parts of Los Angeles County. To understand why water affordability and quality have suffered so much in our area, we need to look at where our water comes from, and who is supplying it.

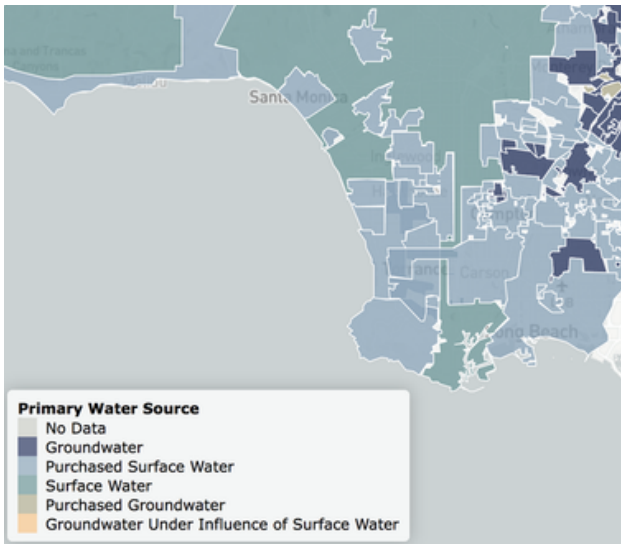
In Los Angeles we are constantly running low on water, given our geographical location and the

Photo credit: LADWP 2015 Urban Water Management Plan, pES-3.

frequency of drought in Southern California. The South Coast Region (Los Angeles County, Orange County, and San Diego County) produces only 8% of California's total freshwater, but is home to more than a third of the state's population. This means that the demand for water in Los Angeles far outstrips the amount of water naturally available to us. Only one-third of the drinking water used in Los Angeles County is sourced from local supplies; the remaining two-thirds is imported.

The water that is imported for use in Los Angeles comes from three major sources. The first is Owens Valley in Eastern California, with water for Los Angeles being diverted from Mono Lake. The second is water from Northern California in the Sierra Nevada mountains, which is transported to Los Angeles by the California State Water Project. The third is the Colorado River, which also supplies water to Mexico and to six other states. This water from distant sources is transported to Los Angeles through a system of aqueducts. Importing so much of our water is very expensive, and also damaging to the ecosystems and communities of the regions whose water we are diverting.

In South Los Angeles, as shown on the map below, almost all of our water is purchased water: in other words, most of our water comes from sources far beyond Los Angeles County limits. Lessening our dependence on imported water is key to securing water equity for South Los Angeles, and across Los Angeles efforts are underway to reduce our reliance on imported water. Mayor Karen Bass' 2026 Climate Action Plan for Los Angeles includes the goal to source 70% of the City's water locally by 2035. This reliance can be reduced by enlarging the capacity to recycle wastewater in the region; capturing a greater amount of stormwater for everyday use; and increasing clean groundwater supplies to expand water supply from local sources. Some progress has been achieved on this front, with two large water recycling treatment facilities being developed in Los Angeles, and with over 120 billion gallons of stormwater being captured in the 2025-2026 rainy season - yet more can and should be done.



This map shows that the majority of South Los Angeles relies primarily as a water source on imported water - more specifically, on purchased surface water. Source: Los Angeles County Water System Governance Map, UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation, https://lciwaterprojects.github.io/lacwatergovmap/.

Why is a Reliance on Imported Water a Barrier to Water Equity?

The fact that so much of our water is imported from other locations deepens environmental injustices in those places, and also means that ensuring water equity within Los Angeles is very complicated. Importing water requires complex water infrastructure and water management. This is very expensive, for the following reasons:

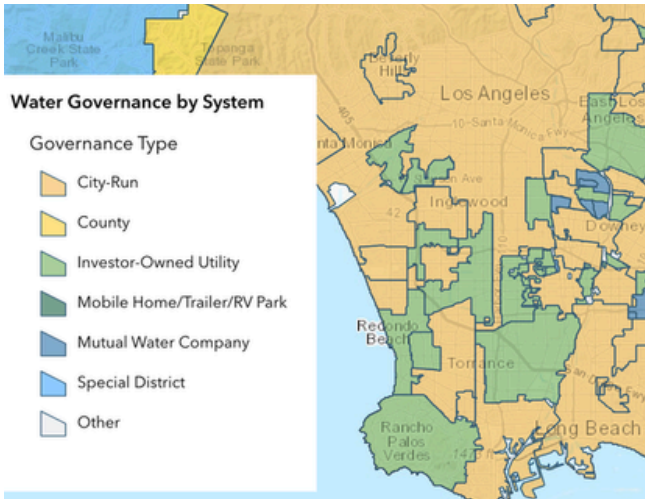
- The further water has to travel before it is processed and comes out of our taps, the more time there is for it to pick up contaminants from the surrounding environment. Therefore, imported water is often more polluted than locally sourced water and needs to be treated more thoroughly and using increasingly sophisticated technology.
- Moving water over long distances to reach Los Angeles is a high energy process, which is resource intensive and thus expensive. For example, the California State Water Project, which transports a high volume of water to Southern California, is the **largest single user** of electrical energy in the state and has historically accounted for 2-3% of all the electricity consumed in California.
- Since all of this is far more complex than water management used to be in Los Angeles, there is an increasing amount of regulatory oversight. This is not bad in itself - we want our water to be regulated and safe! - but it does make everyday local water system operations more expensive.

The impacts of these expenses hit South Los Angeles particularly severely, given that South Los Angeles is more dependent on purchased water than other parts of the County. Since South Los Angeles has been historically disinvested in, and already lags behind much of the rest of the city in its infrastructure, local water systems often do not have sufficient funds to keep up with these complex demands.

Who Delivers Our Drinking Water in South Los Angeles?

Let's move on to thinking about water utilities. Understanding who delivers the water that is used in South Los Angeles is another important part of understanding barriers to water equity in the area. Los Angeles' largest water supplier is LADWP, but it actually serves less than half of the population of Los Angeles County, as water supply systems in Los Angeles are heavily decentralized.

In fact, in Los Angeles County on the whole, there are approximately 189 different water utility suppliers, and in South Los Angeles in particular, there are over 50 different water suppliers. This includes LADWP, as well as a variety of other smaller water suppliers. Some of these are public utilities run by community suppliers, and some are privately owned water suppliers, which operate for profit. The reason that South Los Angeles in particular has so many different water utility suppliers can be traced back to the region's agricultural and oil history, combined with a historical lack of regulation governing groundwater well construction.



This map shows that much of South and Southeast Los Angeles operates on smaller, investor-owned water systems, which has led to a higher concentration of systems operating with contaminant violations. Source: UCLA's 2025 Southern California Community Water Systems Mapping Tool.

The photos above show the Sativa Water District in Compton in 2018, when a high level of manganese in the water supply turned water brown. This demonstrated the fragility of smaller water utilities, which tend to only invest in infrastructure if it breaks or fails due to limited resources. Source: UCLA's The Human Right To Water In Poor Communities of Color: Southern Los Angeles County.

The fact that South Los Angeles has a lot of small and medium sized water suppliers is significant because smaller water systems can be more vulnerable to failure than large water systems and more likely to fail in providing safe, clean, and affordable drinking water. This is because:

- Smaller water utilities tend to make smaller profits, so they cannot invest in infrastructure in the same way. Yet, since South Los Angeles relies heavily on imported water, big updates to infrastructure and technology are necessary to ensure safe drinking water, so this is particularly worrying.
- Small water utilities have fewer resources and personnel, which might affect water quality. It also means that smaller water suppliers lack the resources to adequately prepare for emergencies and natural disasters, which are on the rise.
- Water affordability also varies between water utilities, with smaller utilities less able to offer financial assistance or aid. Also, privately owned water suppliers often charge their customers more, which is why some communities in South Los Angeles end up paying significantly more for their water than wealthier customers in other parts of the city.

Recent California Water News & Reports

A lot has happened since the original version of this guide was published, much of it relevant to the fight for water equity in South Los Angeles!

Here are some recent water equity related highlights and low points in California water news:

- Monterey Park in Los Angeles County became the first city nationwide where residents voted overwhelmingly to ban data centers, in a June 2026 vote. Data centers threaten water equity by using vast volumes of water and energy each day.
- In May 2026 it was announced that California will receive $27.5 million to identify and replace lead pipes that deliver water to homes.
- 2026 began with the welcome news that, for the first time in over 25 years, the entire state was free of drought. Given the unpredictability of drought and flooding due to increased climate change impacts, this does not mean that our troubles are over - but it is still good news!
- Los Angeles faces a high pollution burden, with the first 5 months of 2026 recorded as the smoggiest in more than a decade. In addition, industrial operations threaten our water - e.g. in May 2026 a ruptured crude oil pipeline spilled 2,400 gallons of oil into the Los Angeles River.
- The 2025 wildfire in Altadena, a historically Black community in Los Angeles, caused contamination in some of the local water supply. As recovery continues in the area, there is an urgent need to address the water inequities facing residents.
- Two proposed recycled water treatment facilities in Los Angeles have continued to advance, with Metropolitan Water District's Pure Water SoCal's environmental review process being certified in early 2026, and with Los Angeles City's Pure Water LA soliciting ongoing feedback from organizations like BWW. These facilities would reduce our dependence on imported water.

This photo shows some of the local support for Monterey Park's ban on establishing data centers in the city. Photo credit: Steven Kung.

The following reports contain recent data and research on California or Los Angeles' water:

- UCLA's 2025 Southern California Community Water Systems Atlas documents different water utilities across Los Angeles and other nearby counties. You can read the report or explore the mapping tool to learn about disparities in water quality and affordability across the region.
- A report released by UCLA in 2024 explores strategies to tackle the issue of premise plumbing - pipes on residential properties that may be outdated or faulty, and therefore contribute to poor water quality. BWW's water work gets a shout out on p38 of this report!
- A June 2025 UCLA report investigates the way the January 2025 wildfires impacted water quality and water systems across Los Angeles County.
- Physicians for Social Responsibility Los Angeles, in collaboration with UCLA, released a 2025 report providing policy recommendations on the expansion of low-income financial assistance programs for water to support renters.
- Check out BWW's 2025 Plastic Report. While this report does not focus solely on water, microplastics are a significant emerging water contaminant and much of the information in this report is therefore very relevant to our tap water!

Section 2:
What Can You Do?

Photo credit: Prostock-Studio, Getty Images.

This section focuses on empowering you. It includes resources on what you can do if you have water quality concerns, low-income assistance programs, choosing a water filtration system, bottled water vs tap water, emergency water disinfection and more!

So, What Can You Do?

Check out this section for actionable advice, and to find answers about concerns you may be facing related to your water. Read on for information about local contaminants of concern, how to pick a water filtration system for your household, water affordability programs, bottled water vs. tap water, and what to do if your water suddenly becomes discolored or tastes funny.

Throughout this section, look out for our Renter Spotlights - these offer advice or insights for anyone who rents their home!

Renter Spotlight:
Over 60% of Angelenos are renters. Many renters pay their water bills through their landlords rather than getting a personal bill themselves. This can make it harder to learn about your water or make changes. The information in Section 2 can empower you to actively make decisions about water in your everyday life!

Water Quality

How Does Water Affect Our Health?

There is a strong link between water and public health, which is perhaps unsurprising since our bodies are made up largely of water! The UN estimates that adults need between 13 and 26 gallons of water per day to meet their basic needs, and over 7 million Americans each year get sick from diseases spread through water.

While clean water is of course important for all of us, it is *especially* important for vulnerable groups including children and pregnant people - the connection between water equity and reproductive justice is particularly clear here:

- For birthing people, contaminants in unclean water have the potential to cross the placenta and affect the development of the fetus, or even to cause premature birth or other complications.
- For infants, unclean water can have an outsized impact because children drink more water relative to their body weight than adults, and might cause developmental or cognitive issues.

This is why access to clean, safe, and affordable water is so important!

Photo credit: Sarahi Apaez, Blue Veil Films.

What Are Some Potential Water Contaminants?

All water - whether in your tap, in a bottle, or in a clear lake - contains some contaminants. However, not all contaminants are bad! Some contaminants occur in water naturally, or are added to tap water to protect our health. For example, low levels of disinfectants like chlorine are added to water to kill harmful waterborne germs; and low levels of fluoride in our water prevent tooth decay and lead to fewer cavities.

However, some contaminants are bad for our health, such as those that enter water supplies from sewage discharge, industrial activities, or rusty pipes.

The EPA regulates 90 known contaminants in our tap water, trying to ensure that contaminant levels in public drinking water do not exceed set Maximum Contaminant Levels (MCLs). Many public health experts argue that these EPA regulations, as currently set, are inadequate because many emerging contaminants have not been added to their list and are unregulated. Only one new MCL has been set by the EPA in the past 30 years, despite relevant scientific studies linking many contaminants to poor health outcomes.

The table on the right lists a few water contaminants that affect public health, alongside some of their potential health impacts.

Renter Spotlight:

Renters in Los Angeles who are covered by the City's Rent Stabilization Ordinance have more tenant protections against price hikes, and all units built before 1978 are covered by this ordinance. However, note that lead water pipes were not banned until 1986 - so if your apartment is rent stabilized there is a slightly higher chance of lead being present.

Contaminant Type - Lead

- Lead can enter the water supply from older lead-containing pipes or industrial releases.
- Lead accumulates in the body over time and is toxic at any concentration.
- Potential health impacts include: cardiac disease, nerve disorders, cancer, and reproductive harm such as miscarriage.

Contaminant Type - PFAS

- PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a family of man-made chemicals that are highly toxic, and are known as 'forever chemicals' because they break down very slowly.
- In California, PFAS primarily get into our water supply from industrial sites, landfills, and wastewater treatment plants.
- Potential health impacts include: high cholesterol and liver enzyme changes, increased risk of cancer, and thyroid disruption.

Contaminant Type - Manganese

- Manganese is a mineral found both in natural sources and as a result of human activities.
- It is an essential nutrient at low doses, but can cause health concerns at higher concentrations.
- When found in water, manganese might turn your water and fixtures brown or red.
- Potential health impacts include: neurological issues, stunted cognitive growth for infants.

Contaminant Type - Chromium-6

- Chromium-6 is a tasteless, odorless metallic element that enters water supply through industrial contamination.
- It has been widely found in drinking water across Los Angeles County, and in particularly high concentrations in South Los Angeles.
- Potential health impacts include: respiratory & digestive issues, infant developmental issues.

Contaminant Type - Nitrates

- Nitrates are naturally occurring, and are in water and many vegetables in low levels.
- Very high concentrations of nitrates are often caused by agricultural runoff or sewage, and pose risks to babies and infants in particular.
- Potential health impacts include: low birth weights, 'baby blue syndrome', digestive issues.

How Can I Find Out What's In My Water?

For most of us in Los Angeles, the water that comes out of our taps has been highly treated. In order to make informed decisions about your water usage at home, it is important to understand where your water comes from, and what is in it. Knowledge is power! The following steps can help you to gain more information about your water.

Step 1: Identify your water utility provider
You can use this website to identify your water provider, based on your zip code or full address. If you pay your water bill directly, you could also look at a utility bill - but this will not be true for many renters.

Step 2: Find your Water Quality Report
All water utilities are required by law to provide a Water Quality Report, sometimes known as a Consumer Confidence Report, to the households whose water they supply. These reports must either be mailed to you or must be available online on your water utility's website. If you cannot find your Water Quality Report, call or email your water provider to request a copy.

Step 3: Understand your Water Quality Report
Your Water Quality Report might be laid out differently depending on your particular water utility. Each report at minimum is required to contain the following information, which can help you understand how your drinking water might affect your health:

- The source of your drinking water.
- A list of all detected regulated contaminants and their concentration levels in your water - use this helpful guide sheet to understand these numbers.
- The potential health effects of any contaminants detected at a level that violates EPA standards.
- An explanation of how the public can participate in upcoming local drinking water decisions.

Renter Spotlight:
Remember that as a renter, it is your landlord's responsibility to ensure your unit is habitable. This includes addressing urgent concerns and making sure you have cold and hot water, that there are no plumbing leaks, and that your unit is connected to a sewage disposal system.

Other resources to understand your tap water

- Environmental Working Group's online Tap Water Database lists all the water utilities in California. If you click on the water utility that supplies your household or input your zip code, you will be able to see which contaminants might be present in high levels in your water.
- UCLA's LA County Water System Governance Map is interactive and offers statistics, bill information, and relevant links about your water utility supplier.
- The SAFER website (Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience) offers a lot of detailed survey data on drinking water in California. The link provided takes you to their interactive map - if you select 'Los Angeles' only under the 'County' tab, you can see data about water equity throughout Los Angeles.

This photo was taken at a BWW community meeting in September 2024, where our EJ team shared information with South Los Angeles residents about how they can learn more about their tap water. Photo credit: Black Women for Wellness.

What About My Pipes, Do They Affect My Water?

Your Water Quality Report should tell you about the quality of your water when it leaves the treatment plant. However, it is possible for contaminants to enter your water supply elsewhere. For example, contaminants can enter the water by infiltrating leaky pipes or even by leaching out of the interior walls of pipes. Indeed, in cases like in Flint, Michigan, it was the combination of the drinking source changing to more polluted water and that water corroding aging lead pipes and plumbing fixtures. As a rule of thumb, the older a home or community, and the fewer investment dollars it has seen over the years, the greater the risk that your water might be contaminated after leaving its treatment plant.

If you are worried about your pipes at home, the only way to know for sure what's in your water as it comes out of your tap is to get it tested. Some water utilities offer free home water testing, so you can call to find out - or you can test your water at home if you have available funds and are concerned. There are a variety of home test kits, ranging from $35 all the way up to $400. It is also possible to get cheaper testing kits that test specifically for lead, if this is your primary concern.

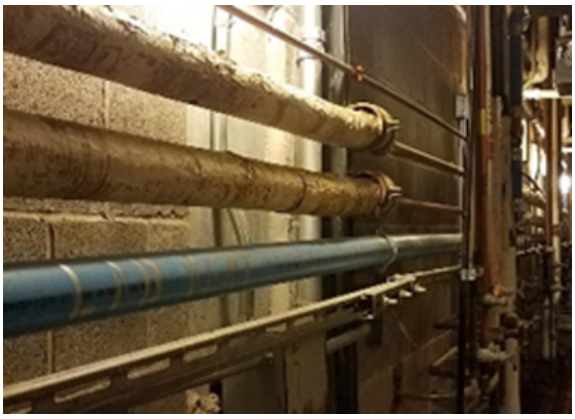


Photo Credit: Environmental Protection Agency.

Photo Credit: Abigail Clarkin.

Should I Use A Water Filter At Home?

At BWW, we recommend using a water filter to treat your tap water if you are worried about your drinking water quality.

Water filter pitchers are the most common kind of household water filter because they are easy to use, do not take up a lot of space, and are inexpensive. These water filters work by using activated carbon to remove many chemical and metal contaminants from water. Other household water filters include reverse osmosis units, which are often fitted under sinks, or might even be fitted to your plumbing to supply your entire home. However, while these filtration systems are highly effective, they are also very complex and expensive, and have been shown to waste significant amounts of water.

What should I think about when picking a water filter?

- Make sure your water filter is NSF-certified! NSF (National Sanitation Foundation) has established standards for water filters, and since filter efficiency varies a lot between brands, this guarantees a certain level of performance. This NSF page lists all water filtration systems that meet this standard.

- Different water filters are more efficient at tackling specific contaminants. If you have a particular taste concern about your tap water, or are keen to eliminate a particular known contaminant from your water, make sure you get a water filter that will actually address your personal concern.
    - If you are particularly worried about PFAS contaminating your water, here is a this article recommends water filters that best reduce PFAS in tap water.
    - This article compares different water filter pitchers, and lists their pros and cons.
    - Remember that if you want to look up which contaminants are commonly found in the water provided by your water utility, you can look this up using this online database.

This water filter guide can help you to decide which water filter is best for you depending on your priorities (cost, efficiency, contaminant type).

An important note about water filters - you must remember to change your filter regularly! Otherwise you may end up doing more harm than good. If a water filter is not changed at the appropriate time, it will no longer effectively remove contaminants, and might actually increase the concentration of those contaminants in your water! Changing your water filter is important for your health, since it maintains the safety of your filtered water.

At a community town hall in 2023, BWW gave away free water filter pitchers. Photo credit: TRUST South LA.

How Can I Report Major Issues With My Water?

If you notice any major problems with your tap water - if your water smells bad, is discolored, or tastes bad - you should take action as soon as possible to protect the health of your household!

These are some of the steps that you can take:

1. **Save at least a few samples of your tap water**. One option is to store some of the worrisome tap water in a bottle. Be sure to mark the bottle with the date and time that you took the sample.
2. **Call your landlord or your water utility**, or both, to inform them of the problem, make a complaint, and inquire about any known issues.
3. If you do not receive a response, **contact your landlord or water utility again**. Reiterate the problem and stress its urgency.
4. If you still do not get a response, or if the response is lackluster, **contact CalEPA directly to make a complaint**. This link leads you to the CalEPA Environmental Complaint System. You can also submit a complaint to the LA County Department of Public Health.
5. **Contact your local elected officials**, and let them know about the problem and the urgency of the situation, given the potential impact to your health and the health of your community. To determine who your local officials are, you can use this tool.
6. **Reach out to us at BWW!** If you are experiencing a major problem with your tap water, we want to know about it, and will provide you with as much support and information as possible!

Should I Use Bottled Water as An Alternative?

Unless your water is contaminated, bottled water is not usually a good alternative to tap water. If you don't feel comfortable drinking tap water by itself, we recommend utilizing the tips above for serious concerns. Otherwise, filtering your tap water can be a good option, and using reusable water bottles made of glass, stainless steel, or aluminum. Outside of emergency situations, where your tap water is severely compromised, it is not true that bottled water is generally a safer alternative to tap water.

- The majority of plastic water bottles are made of polyethylene terephthalate (PET). PET plastic can contain over 300 chemicals, and **at least half of these can leach into food and beverages.** The process of making PET plastic is also harmful, especially for Black and Brown communities.
- A 2024 study found that bottled water contains **thousands of nanoplastics** - these are tiny fragments of plastic, and are released more when water bottles are subject to heat.
- Bottled water is **subject to fewer regulations** than tap water. Tap water is heavily regulated by both federal and state laws, as explained in Section 1, and must meet strict standards set by the EPA (Environmental Protection Agency). However, bottled water is regulated by the FDA (Federal Food & Drug Administration), who cannot require certified lab testing or violation reporting.

RJ Spotlight:

Certain chemicals that commonly leach out of plastic bottles into beverages are especially worrying for reproductive health. BPA, for instance, is an endocrine disrupting chemical, which affects hormones, can impact fertility, and poses specific risks for babies and infants.

In addition, many bottled water companies use unsustainable and unjust business tactics.

- Bottled water companies use predatory marketing tactics and spend millions of dollars per year spreading the lie that bottled water is always safer than tap water.
- Buying bottled water is exponentially more expensive than tap water, yet Food and Water Watch reported that 64% of bottled water is actually just up-charged tap water!
- Shipping millions of gallons of water around the country, and sometimes even internationally, has severe climate impacts.
- Taking clean water away from rural communities to sell elsewhere is unjust.
- The **production of plastic bottles** and their disposal is bad for human health and the environment.

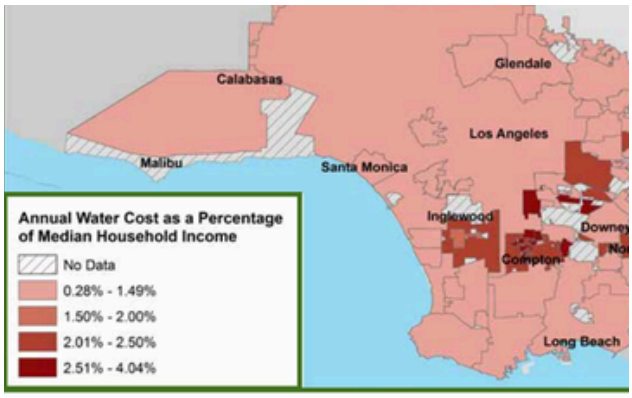
Photo credit: Jan van der Wolf.

Why Isn't Boiling Your Water A Long-Term Fix?

In emergency situations where water sources are compromised, such as hurricanes, pipe breakage or flooding, local authorities will provide notice recommending drinking bottled water, boiling water or disinfecting water with bleach. While these methods kill some disease-causing microorganisms, **boiling water or adding bleach to your water will not remove most chemicals, heavy metals and salts.**

Water Affordability

Across California, in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of households across the state struggled with water debt. In 2021, a survey showed that 12% of households in the state were behind on water bills, with Californians owing over $1 billion statewide. Across the state and in Los Angeles itself, this debt is unequally distributed, with low-income and communities of color in South Los Angeles bearing the burden. As the map below shows, households in South Los Angeles spend a higher proportion of their income on water than other households across the city.



Source: UCLA's Los Angeles County Community Water Systems.

California's water affordability woes have not gone away in recent years, with a 2025 UCLA report finding that water bills in Los Angeles County have been rising faster than inflation - in previous years, the price of water has been shown to increase at as much as 6 times the rate of inflation! This disparity is worsened by the fact that water rates are highly variable across Los Angeles - and that communities of color and low-income households often pay higher water rates. Across Los Angeles, some households might pay as little as $200 per year for water, while other households covered by a different water utility might pay over $2000 for the same amount of water.

Check out the EPA's guide for understanding your water bill if you want help understanding your water bill, to get a better grasp of how you are being charged and what these charges are going towards.

RJ Spotlight:

Pregnancy, delivery, and postpartum care costs in the United States are some of the highest in the world at over ~$20,000 per child, with about $3,000 of that coming out of pocket for those with health insurance. These expenses, coupled with high utility bills, are a heavy burden, and are not sustainable for many.

Is Financial Assistance Available for Water?

Some water utilities offer need-based assistance programs that can provide financial relief for households struggling to afford the cost of water. The assistance programs available vary between water utility suppliers, and might involve a one-time debt relief payment, or continuous bill assistance. The eligibility for most programs is based on total household income, although some water utilities also have discounted rates for seniors.

The following contains current assistance programs that offer debt relief and/or bill assistance:

- Class A Customer Assistance Programs. Here is a list of bill assistance programs at Class A regulated water utilities (water utilities with 10,000+ service connections). Some of these water utilities cover South Los Angeles, so it is worth checking whether your water utility is included in this list.

The best way to find out if you qualify for assistance is to consult your water utility's website, or give them a call. Some water utilities have their own financial assistance programs, or can potentially offer extended payment plans and payment deadline extensions.

Can I Save Money By Saving Water At Home?

Ensuring that you are using water efficiently at home can save you money on your water bill! Read on to learn about some easy ways to save water at home.

Note that being efficient with your water only influences water affordability if your water bill reflects your water usage. If you pay a flat fee each month, being water efficient will not impact your bill - but it still promotes water sustainability more broadly. This is important in California given the rise in extreme weather events brought about by climate change.

There are three main ways you can save water - and potentially money - at home.

1 - Obtaining water efficient household appliances and devices to use at home. Conserving water using accessible devices and choosing water efficient appliances when replacing old items can help you to save both water and money within your household.

- The simplest way to conserve water in your home is to affix water saving devices onto sinks and showerheads, which reduce the volume of water released.
  - LADWP offers free water conservation devices including sink attachments, showerheads, and toilet leak detection tablets.
  - LA County and other water purveyors, beyond LADWP, also offer free conservation kits!
- If you are purchasing new water-using appliances, rebates are widely available to encourage customers to choose water efficient appliances. These rebates commonly cover washing machines, refrigerators, toilets, and watering systems.
  - Over 100 water utilities across Los Angeles offer rebates directly to their customers.
  - The SoCal Water$mart rebate program also offers broad rebates across the region.

Renter Spotlight:
Note that the SoCal Water$mart rebate program is open to renters as well as homeowners, and you might still be eligible even if you don't pay your water bill directly. See their FAQs page for more information.

2 - Reducing water waste in daily household activities. You can save money at home by using water more efficiently in daily and weekly activities. This does not mean depriving yourself of water that you and your family needs, but simply involves cutting down on water waste - the kinds of water uses that are bad both for the environment and for your wallet.

Incorporating the following water saving habits into your household routines can save a significant amount of water:

Water Saving Tip	Amount of Water Saved
Turn your tap off while you brush your teeth	3 gallons each time
Shorten your daily shower from 10 to 5 minutes	10 gallons each time
Fill your bathtub halfway instead of fully to the top	17-20 gallons per bath
If possible, run a full dishwasher instead of handwashing dirty dishes	15 gallons each time
If handwashing dishes, turn the tap on for rinsing instead of running it constantly	17-20 gallons per bath
Wash 1 full laundry load rather than 2 half loads	21 gallons each time
Fix leaks in your household	27-90 gallons each day

3 - Collecting and reusing rainwater and/or wastewater. For some household chores, water that is potable (water that is safe for drinking) is not necessary; using alternative sources of water can save you money and is good for the planet.

- For activities like watering plants, washing cars and equipment, and flushing or refilling toilets, you could consider collecting rainwater.
- The most common way to harvest rainwater is to use a rain barrel situated in your yard, or in a convenient spot outside your building. This rain barrel can then be connected to a hose, or you could draw water from it directly if preferred.
- You can contact local City agencies about possible rebate programs, and certain utilities have also distributed rain barrels for free in the past. It's worth keeping your eyes peeled for this!
- Click here for other creative methods of harvesting rainwater for your home. There are also simpler methods like using regular buckets when it's raining!
- As well as collecting rainwater, it is also possible to reuse some of the wastewater that we generate around our homes. Used bathwater and dishwashing water can also be saved and used - once at room temperature - to water plants.

This is a rain barrel, which can collect water for household or backyard use. Photo credit: Sustainable Milton.

If you have a backyard or front yard, or any other outdoor space, DIY rain gardens are a good way to slow down rainwater and support plant life. Basic rain gardens can be built using just a shovel, rocks, and some native plants. This resource gives more information about rain gardens. Photo source: Active SGV, Pilar Reynaldo.

Renter Spotlight:

Collecting rainwater is possible whether you're a homeowner or a renter, as long as you have access to some outdoor space. A shared courtyard or even just common space by the edge of the building at a rental property can be great spots for collecting rainwater - just make sure you communicate with your neighbors, and/or landlord!

Section 3: BWW's Work and South Los Angeles' Water Future

Photo credit: Black Women for Wellness.

This section focuses on how BWW's EJ team is tackling water inequity. It includes the results of our findings from conversations with community members, and how we're working to address these concerns and move towards a better water future for everyone.

Community Insights on Water

BWW's Environmental Justice team has done ongoing community engagement around water equity issues since 2022 - which means that over the years, we have collected a lot of information on how Black community members in South Los Angeles feel about their water. Gaining a deep understanding of our community's water concerns and priorities is important, as this helps BWW fight for a better water future that serves the needs of our community.

One of the major ways community insights have been collected is through two broad outreach efforts - a phone banking campaign in 2022 to assess the water-related needs and concerns of Black residents, and a door-to-door canvassing campaign in 2024 to provide educational resources and check in once more about major water concerns. The data yielded by these efforts have guided BWW's work ever since, and shaped the content of this water guide.

Our 2022 phone banking effort involved contacting over 7,000 households across South Los Angeles, and resulted in over 750 completed surveys. All survey respondents identified as Black, and 97% of those surveyed identified as women. Some takeaways from the phone bank are as follows:

- Two thirds of those surveyed do not trust their tap water.
- 35% indicated that they have trouble affording their water bill.
- 84% of Black households surveyed rely to some degree on bottled water.
- 74% of those surveyed wanted better understanding of their water, and supported policy advocacy to support safer drinking water.
- The vast majority of those surveyed did not know where to go with questions about their tap water quality, or about financial assistance.

This photo depicts attendees of a 2026 BWW community workshop on water equity connecting with one another. Photo credit: Sarahi Apaez, Blue Veil Films.

For our 2024 canvassing effort, BWW's outreach team knocked on over 850 doors, and spoke with 329 Black households. While our 2022 outreach focused on assessing community needs, this effort focused on providing water education that met some of those identified needs. However, we still asked community members a few questions to guide our programming, and the takeaways were as follows:

- Of those surveyed, 93% do not trust the quality of their tap water.
- The overwhelming majority of those surveyed, at 98%, use plastic bottles in some capacity to contain their drinking water.
- After being given information and resources by our outreach team, only 15% of those surveyed strongly felt that they did not know where to go with questions about their tap water, compared to 79% at the start of the survey. Over 50% of respondents indicated that they now knew where to seek information about their water concerns.

Building Towards a More Equitable Water Future in South Los Angeles

Public Education on Water Equity

This photo depicts two members of BWW's Environmental Justice team tabling at a community event to give out resources, and talk to residents about their water concerns among other things. Photo credit: Black Women for Wellness.

Our Environmental Justice team is committed to ongoing public education around water equity in South Los Angeles because we believe that a deeper understanding of water issues is necessary to move toward a more equitable water future. This guide, and other BWW water education resources, are one way to help our community build their knowledge base.

In addition, since 2022 our team has hosted and presented at dozens of community meetings to provide information about water widely. These meetings have ranged from town halls to webinars and listening sessions, through to workshops in schools, and even training sessions for medical students. At some of these workshops, physical resources such as water filters or step-by-step water testing guides have been provided so that community members are able to take proactive steps toward securing better drinking water in their homes. While the topics and conversations at these meetings have varied, all of them have aimed to empower residents so that they can play an active role in accessing and enjoying high quality water in the way that they deserve.

BWW's deep commitment to ongoing water education is sustained by perpetual demand from community members, who consistently come to us with water concerns, and express the importance of increased water education for themselves, their families, and their neighbors. At a community town hall held in September 2024, when town hall attendees were asked what action steps they'd like to see from BWW around water, over half replied that they wanted more education, and to better understand where their water comes from and how it travels through South Los Angeles. This demonstrates that not only do community members want both practical information about their everyday drinking water and to understand how water systems works more broadly.

In addition, BWW's dedicated Community Health Outreach Workers (CHOW team) participates in numerous community events in South Los Angeles each week, where they speak with community members about water issues, environmental justice, and a myriad of other concerns. This has been a way for us to provide broad education on water in our community, and has also allowed us to hear from more people about their water priorities.

Knowing where our water comes from, how it is treated, and how our built environment shapes the way we experience water is important. Addressing systemic issues that arise in this broader picture is needed to secure water equity for everyone. Systemic change requires adapting our built environment in ways that promote cleaner, healthier, and more climate resilient water for our entire region.

Transforming South Los Angeles' Water Infrastructure

Investing in and updating our water infrastructure has the potential to transform water in South Los Angeles and move us closer to water equity. BWW is involved in various efforts to bring this transformation about.

Water infrastructure is a blanket term referring to the many systems in our built environment that collect, treat, store, transport, and manage water. There are many ways in which this water infrastructure can be improved in order to make our water cleaner, more affordable, and easier to access. This is true on a small scale (e.g. planting more native plants and expanding our tree canopy), and on a much larger scale (e.g. building large systems to collect and reuse rainwater across Los Angeles). Many of these infrastructure improvements are also multi-benefit. This means that they transform our neighborhoods and communities in positive ways beyond just their water impacts. These infrastructure improvements can also address community needs by providing more parks and open space, making our streets safer, and so on. To give a better sense of this, the table below lists some examples of water infrastructure updates, and explains how they improve water equity.

Water Infrastructure Update Type	What is This?	Why Does it Improve Water Quality?
Planting trees and/or native plants	Planting trees and native plants in public areas, schools, and yards.	Trees and native plants reduce threats to our water quality, as they allow rain that falls in Los Angeles to absorb into the ground. Without them, rain is more likely to become stormwater runoff: rain that runs across our roads and homes and eventually into our waterways, and picks up contaminants along the way.
Collecting rainwater for reuse	Using storage tanks, barrels, or even just buckets to capture and store rainwater so that it can be used to water plants.	This cuts down on the amount of water needed in a home, school, community space, or public area. It can save you money by lowering your water bill, as well as allowing us to conserve more water.
Capturing stormwater for treatment and increased water supply	Larger scale infrastructure can be used to collect and then manage stormwater, such as bioswales, cisterns, and stormwater infiltration galleries. Stormwater capture systems are being implemented across all of Los Angeles County as seen in this map.	Collecting and managing stormwater when it falls as rain helps to improve our water quality, as it allows many of the contaminants in this rainwater to be removed. This treated water can then be stored to boost our local water supply here in South LA, making us less dependent on imported water that is often highly contaminated and expensive. A high profile example of a stormwater project in Los Angeles is the updates being done at MacArthur Park.

Water Infrastructure Update Type	What is This?	Why Does it Improve Water Quality?
Replacing impermeable surfaces with permeable surfaces	A permeable surface is one that allows water to enter the soil underneath it. LA County has 312,435 acres of pavement or 488 square miles.	Using permeable surfaces contributes to lowering polluting stormwater runoff which threatens our water quality. It can also prevent flooding, as the reason our neighborhoods and streets sometimes flood when it rains is because so much of our built environment is made up of impermeable surfaces like concrete.
Investing in green and open spaces in parks and schools	Adding or enhancing existing water features or green spaces in our parks and schools.	Investing in local parks and schools in South Los Angeles addresses historical injustices and issues of disinvestment. Not only can these investments improve water quality and conserve water at these sites, but this also provides a valuable opportunity for community education.
Building facilities and systems for water recycling	Water recycling involves treating water that has already been used in homes, public spaces, or in businesses to remove contaminants.	Small or large scale water recycling means that more local water supplies are available, reducing the need to import so much water from afar, which often perpetuates environmental injustice in these communities. A functional water recycling project already exists in San Diego, and others are being built in Los Angeles currently.

Increased levels of vegetation, especially native plants, allow for more stormwater capture as well as providing cooling benefits for residents, as well as recreational opportunities. Photo credit: Zoe Cunliffe.

Investment through LA County's Safe Clean Water Program is currently supporting infrastructure improvements at Edward Vincent Jr. Park in Inglewood, including increased capacity for stormwater capture. This will improve water quality in downstream water sources, as well as providing other community benefits. Photo credit: Safe Clean Water Program.

One way BWW is supporting the transformation of South Los Angeles' water infrastructure - and the improvement in water quality, affordability, and access - is through active engagement with the Safe Clean Water Program (SCWP). The SCWP is a Los Angeles County program that was approved by a majority of voters countywide in 2018. It generates millions of dollars each year for local water projects through a special tax on private properties. City agencies, non-profits, and community groups apply for funding to create transformative water infrastructure projects that benefit local residents.

BWW's EJ team has incorporated discussions of the SCWP and its goals into our educational outreach efforts to raise awareness about water infrastructure issues and also to gauge what local South Los Angeles residents want to see in their communities. In 2024, over 320 community surveys were collected from Black residents specifically about the SCWP. Two major highlights of these surveys were:

- 95% of respondents indicated support for SCWP funds being used to support projects in South Los Angeles.
- When asked what project benefits are the most urgent, respondents were most enthusiastic about improving drinking water quality (92% of respondents said this), closely followed by improving water conservation (62% said this is urgent) and creating more green space (54% indicated this).

In 2024 BWW's Environmental Justice team was invited to give a keynote presentation at the Metropolitan Water District. Photo credit: Black Women for Wellness.

Using this survey data, as well as our ongoing community engagement, BWW is engaging with the SCWP and other water decision-makers across Southern California to uplift the water priorities of Black South Los Angeles residents. On the SCWP, BWW's Action Project was appointed to a decision-making committee that votes on applications to fund local water projects in our neighborhoods, and raises the voices of community members in this space. Beyond the SCWP, we are actively engaging with agencies and water decision-makers whose choices over where to invest funds will have a big impact on our communities, and what the future of our water looks like. For example, our EJ team has been engaging with the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California (MWD), an entity which supplies water to around 19 million people across the region, and whose decisions therefore have the potential to transform Los Angeles' water infrastructure.

Looking to the future, BWW's EJ team is committed to ongoing exploration of community-driven ways to improve and transform water infrastructure here in South Los Angeles. To aid us in this mission, we have joined a collective of CBOs and Tribal entities known as ReDesignLA, to work in partnership with others to best support local water-related projects and the ability of our staff and community members to shape and influence these projects. Keep an eye out for ongoing opportunities to engage with our team and keep this conversation going!

Safe Clean Water Program Coordinators participated in a BWW community event on water equity in February 2026. Photo credit: Sarahi Apaez, Blue Veil Films.

In Conclusion: Structural Change is Overdue, Be Kind to Yourself

Most of the water quality and water equity issues that affect South Los Angeles are structural and systematic. Therefore, long-term and sustainable solutions require change that is also structural and systematic. If you have concerns about your water, it is important to educate yourself, and there are various steps that can be taken on the personal level. That said, these water quality issues are not your fault, and it's not possible or desirable for you tackle every problem with water systems in the US on your own! Federal and local governments have historically disinvested in and neglected Black and Brown communities and the water systems serving them. Fixing water quality problems ultimately requires structural change at the government and agency level to correct these wrongs.

On the national, state, and city level, a variety of organizations and elected representatives are pushing for legislative and water agency changes to improve water equity by upgrading water infrastructure, providing smaller water utilities with more regulatory oversight and more resources, and updating the standards used to regulate water quality. For example, in 2024 the EPA finalized an update of federal drinking water standards to add six PFAS or "forever chemicals" to the list of contaminants that must be regulated in our drinking water. Locally in California, there is also ongoing advocacy around water affordability, with efforts to pass policy that would improve low-income water rate assistance and expand resident protections. Locally, there is ongoing work to bolster water supplies in Los Angeles and reduce dependence on imported water.

Here at Black Women for Wellness, our Environmental Justice team is committed to ongoing education, research, advocacy, and empowerment to further water equity for our community. Stay tuned to our website, emails and social media for further water equity related updates, and to get involved!

Photo credit: Black Women for Wellness

Terminology

Agricultural runoff: Agricultural runoff is a source of water pollution from water that does not sink into the soil, but instead moves over farmland ground picking up pollutants along the way. Common agricultural pollutants include chemicals from pesticides, and this runoff risks contaminating local drinking water supplies.

Atmospheric river storm: Atmospheric rivers are storms much like rivers in the sky that exude huge amounts of rain, and can therefore cause flooding and mudslides, and have severe environmental and human impacts.

BPA and BPS: Bisphenol A (BPA) and Bisphenol S (BPS) are chemical compounds commonly used in the manufacture of plastics. They are commonly found in plastic water bottles, and have the potential to contaminate the water that these bottles contain. BPA and BPS have been associated with health harms including cardiovascular disease, reproductive harm, diabetes, and hormone interference.

CalEPA: The California Environmental Protection Agency (CalEPA) is a state agency that regulates environmental concerns within California. They oversee California's State Water Board, which has authority over water allocation and water quality protection throughout the state.

Climate change: Climate change refers to long-term changes in temperatures and weather patterns across the world due to human activities. In particular, human activities that involve the burning of fossil fuels like coal, oil, and natural gas.

Climate whiplash: Climate whiplash is the weather phenomenon worsened by climate change, where a location experiences rapid swings between different types of weather extremes. In California, climate whiplash might involve swinging quickly between drought and flooding.

Contaminants: A water contaminant is a chemical, biological, or radiological substance found within water. Strictly speaking, anything found within water other than water molecules counts as a contaminant. Tap water therefore contains some contaminants that are not harmful to health, and might even be beneficial; whereas many contaminants can be harmful when consumed at high concentrations in drinking water.

Environmental justice: Environmental justice demands that everyone - regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or national origin - has the right to the same environmental protections and benefits, as well as meaningful involvement in policies that shape the landscape of their communities.

Environmental racism: Environmental racism picks out the links between racial inequality and disproportionate environmental hazards and harms. In the US, race is the strongest predictor of the amount of environmental burden faced by a household - environmental racism is the injustice that environmental justice is fighting to correct.

EPA: The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is a federal agency that regulates environmental concerns across the nation. The EPA is responsible for the regulations that establish quality standards for tap water across the country.

Freshwater: Freshwater is naturally occurring liquid or frozen water, and is the water found in ponds, lakes, rivers, streams, glaciers, and icebergs. The term refers to water with low concentrations of dissolved salt, and so excludes seawater.

Groundwater: Groundwater is water, from rain or melting ice and snow, that soaks into the soil and is stored in the tiny spaces between rocks and particles of soil. Groundwater accounts for over 90% of the US' freshwater resources, and is widely used to provide drinking water - either by coming to the surface to fill rivers, lakes, and springs, or by being pumped from a well.

Human right to water: All California residents have a right to water that is protected by law. Assembly Bill 685 passed in 2012, and states that all human beings have the right to safe, clean, affordable, and accessible water that is suitable for consumption, cooking, and sanitary purposes.

Intensive farming: Intensive farming, otherwise known as intensive agriculture, is a type of farming that aims to maximize output (harvests of crops or number of animals) per unit of land. Intensive farming tends to use more water than other farming methods, and also often creates high levels of water contamination through agricultural runoff.

LADWP: The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) is the largest municipal utility in the entirety of the US, and they serve as the water provider for over 4 million people across LA County.

NSF: The National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) is a product testing, inspection, and certification organization. They have established standards for the efficiency of water filtration systems, and water filters that are NSF certified are more likely to efficiently remove contaminants from tap water.

PFAS: Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) are a family of man-made chemicals that are highly toxic and are sometimes found in water supplies. They are sometimes referred to as 'forever chemicals' because they break down very slowly, and so can remain in the human body for many years.

Potable water: Potable water is a term that refers to drinking water, which is water that is safe for ingestion.

Rainwater: Rainwater is water that has fallen or been collected as rain, and when collected can be used to carry out various household chores (although is not, without significant treatment, suitable for drinking).

Rebates: Rebates are refunds or 'money back' options offered to customers when they make a purchase, provided by manufacturers, retailers, government agencies, or other organizations. Rebates are available for various household appliances that are efficient in their water usage.

Reproductive justice: The tenets of reproductive justice are as follows: all birthing people should have a right to have or not to have a child, to raise children in safe and healthy conditions regardless of race or income, and to bodily autonomy. These rights are constantly infringed upon by systemic racism and regressive policy, and the reproductive justice lens aims to combat and correct these injustices.

Runoff: Runoff occurs when there is more water than land can absorb, and so water flows across the surface of the land and into nearby bodies of water. Runoff can come from both natural and human activities, such as water from rainfall and snowmelt, or water from agricultural irrigation processes.

Settler colonialism: Settler colonialism is a kind of colonialism where the indigenous peoples of a colonized region are displaced by settlers, who come from elsewhere and then permanently form a society there.

Shutoffs: Shutoffs are the cutting off of utility services - whether water, electricity, gas, or other - to a household in response to unpaid bills. Shutoffs are a racial justice issue, as they disproportionately affect people of color, and tend to last longer in lower-income communities than they do in wealthier neighborhoods.

Stormwater: Stormwater is excess water that originates from the aftermath of rainfall and snowmelt, which is not absorbed into the soil and so constitutes runoff that often then empties into nearby bodies of water. To improve water efficiency, many municipalities are trying to collect and reuse stormwater.

UN: The United Nations (UN) is a global, intergovernmental organization with the aim of maintaining international peace and security, achieving international cooperation, and developing friendly relations among nations.

Wastewater: Wastewater is water that has been used or is surplus, and includes water from household and commercial uses (toilets, showers, sinks), as well as from non-household sources (rain, industrial use). In residential settings, the term ‘sewage’ is sometimes used interchangeably with wastewater.

Wastewater treatment: Wastewater treatment involves cycles of treatment that remove contaminants and impurities from wastewater so that it can safely be discharged back into the environment, or potentially used again in residential or industrial settings.

Water efficiency: Water efficiency is the practice of reducing water waste, by trying to minimize the amount of water used for a task. This is different to water conservation as the emphasis is not on restricting water use, but instead upon using water smartly by aiming to use amounts of water that are proportionate to the purpose at hand.

Water equity: Water equity requires that everyone, regardless of race, income, or other socioeconomic factors, has access to safe, clean, and affordable water.

Water filtration: Water filtration is the use of water filters to remove contaminants from water, usually either by using a fine physical barrier, a chemical process, or a biological process. There are many different kinds of water filter - two of the most common kinds are activated carbon filters, and reverse osmosis filters.

Water governance: Water governance refers to the political and administrative systems that influence the use and management of water. These systems then determine who gets water, how they get it, and their rights in accessing and using that water.

Water infrastructure: A community's water infrastructure includes the various man-made and natural features that move and treat water. In the US, water infrastructure is primarily made up of wastewater, stormwater, and drinking water services that are provided to homes and other institutions that need water.

Water system: A water system is any entity that operates, maintains, or controls facilities for providing potable drinking water service for compensation.

Water utility: A water utility is a government entity, municipal or private corporation, association, or organization that is engaged in furnishing water to public consumers for household or drinking purposes as tap water.

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