



**BLACK WOMEN
FOR WELLNESS**



your human right to
WATER

DRINKING WATER GUIDE FOR SOUTH LOS ANGELES



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This comprehensive Water Guide is intended to offer South Los Angeles residents a single resource to access information on your water.

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 intended to offer South Los Angeles residents a single resource to access the information you deserve on your water. This guide is broken into 2 general sections:

Section 1

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. This section is intended to provide context and history to the issues you may be facing at home.

Section 2

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!

As has been shared by numerous Indigenous communities around the world, who have led the fight to defend healthy waterways and our access to them, water truly is life. We are all of water and must live in communion with Earth's water systems. 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.

DRINKING WATER GUIDE FOR SOUTH LOS ANGELES



Leigh Prather, Getty Images

5 • The Connection Between Your Human Right to Water and Reproductive Justice

7 • Section 1: Context and History of our Drinking Water

8 • Water Equity in the United States

8 • Underinvestment in Infrastructure

9 • Environmental Racism

10 • Inequitable Affordability & Access

11 • Water Safety Concerns

11 • Climate Change Impacts

13 • Water Equity in California & South Los Angeles

13 • Brief History of Water in California

16 • Water Governance & Important California Water Laws

17 • Where Does Water in South Los Angeles Come From?

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

20 • Who Delivers Our Drinking Water in South Los Angeles?

22 • Section 2: What Can You Do?

23 • Water Quality

23 • Human Health & Water

25 • Potential Water Contaminants

28 • What About Your Water?

28 • Step 1 = Identifying Your Water Utility

28 • Step 2 = Finding Your Water Quality Report

29 • Step 3 = Understanding Your Water Quality Report

30 • What if I Want More Information Beyond This Report?

30 • Next Steps: What Actions Can You Take?

30 • Water Filters

32 • Choosing A Water Filter Guide

33 • How to Report Major Issues With Your Water

34 • Water Affordability

34 • California's Water Debt Crisis

35 • Low Income Relief & Debt Relief Programs

36 • How to Aim for Efficient Water Usage in the Home

39 • Bottled Water vs Tap Water

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

Extras:

42 • Terminology

45 • Citations

There are almost a million California residents without clean water and many on the brink of losing access.



The Connection Between Your Human Right to Water & Reproductive Justice

As a human being, you have a right to affordable, accessible, and clean water. As a California resident, this right is protected by law. In 2012, the California Governor signed Assembly Bill (AB) 685, which established [Water Code](#) section 106.3 stating 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, as in 2010 they acknowledged [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, there [are almost a million California](#) residents without clean water and many 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 particular relevance of access to clean water for 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.”](#)

RJ Spotlight:

Access to clean and safe drinking water is vital during pregnancy. For instance, fetuses in the womb develop while floating in amniotic fluid; this fluid is mostly made of water for half of a pregnancy. This is one of the reasons why pregnant people are encouraged to maintain a good and healthy water intake.

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.**

Imagine a mother realizing they'd been unknowingly feeding contaminated water to their children.



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 regardless of race or income, and to bodily autonomy and healthy sexuality. These rights are constantly being infringed upon by systemic racism and regressive policy. The Black maternal and infant mortality rate is 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.

These and other realities plaguing Black Americans create generational harm that is only worsened by being unable to afford or access clean water. Imagine a parent being forced to choose between paying a water utility bill and putting food on the table, a mother realizing they'd been unknowingly feeding contaminated water to their children, or a midwife without clean water trying to help bring a new life into this world. Put well by the authors of the above report, "Providing access to clean water is an essential government service and a basic public health necessity fundamental to reproductive and environmental justice."

Throughout this guide, look for this symbol entitled, "RJ Spotlight" to learn more about the connection between Water and Reproductive Justice.

RJ Spotlight



The [Human Right to Water](#) code in California:



[Clean Water and Reproductive Justice: Lack of Access Harms Women of Color](#) report:



Section 1: Context and History of our Drinking Water



Quick fact:

Lead is a heavy metal that was broadly used in homes until it was banned for residential use in 1978, banned from ceramics and other cooking ware in 1971, and finally banned from use in water pipes in 1986. Unfortunately, homes that have not been properly updated could still contain lead pipes that can cause lead water contamination. Due to the impacts of racial segregation, [Black children are more likely to experience lead contamination](#) than White children in the US.

Water Equity in the United States

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.

More recently 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 construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. These protestors self-described as [water protectors](#), arguing that as well as threatening sacred Indigenous sites, oil pipelines damage the health of our water and prevent equitable access.

There are other water crises occurring across the nation, including PFAS 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.

Underinvestment in Infrastructure

[US water infrastructure](#) is made up of wastewater, stormwater, and drinking water services that are provided to homes and other institutions that need water. Wastewater is water that has been used already or is surplus, 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 rain or snow, and flows over streets and roofs into storm drains, again either to be discharged elsewhere, or to be treated and reused.

RJ Spotlight:

According to the [Center for Disease Control \(CDC\)](#), lead exposure in children can cause problems with growth and development, learning, hearing and speech, and more. [Lead exposure](#) can also cause reduced fertility in both men and women.



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

RJ Spotlight:

Underinvestment in life-supporting resources is a common theme across reproductive justice issues. For instance, many states in the US also don't have an adequate amount of perinatal healthcare providers. In Georgia, [82 of the 159 counties do not have OB/GYNs](#) and 15 of them contain only 1.

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 2021, and the [US drinking water system](#) received a C-, [wastewater](#) treatment plants received a D+, and [stormwater systems](#) received a D. The US hasn't properly invested in its infrastructure - especially the water infrastructure. Many parts of the 50,000 drinking water systems and 15,000 wastewater systems that service millions of people were built over 100 years ago. In fact, upgrades to this system are so behind that every pipe for drinking water will need to be replaced by 2040.

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 the built environment of the nation. [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.

Quick fact:

There are over 200 water utilities in Los Angeles County alone. Some are privately owned.



This image shows one of Southern California's water treatment facilities, which filters contaminants before water reaches our taps. Photo credit: The Metropolitan Water District of Southern California.



The toxic facilities captured in this photo 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

Quick fact:

While this report focuses on the United States, environmental racism is seen globally. Whiter and wealthier nations pollute the most, but don’t bear the largest burden. Developing nations, often with primarily non-White populations, are experiencing certain environmental burdens more greatly and are being forced to spend their limited resources on problems they didn’t create.



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, intentionally and unintentionally, and this can contaminate the nearby community’s water supply. When natural disasters or accidents occur, this harm grows. Therefore, the decision about where to place toxic facilities is connected to both the racial makeup of communities and water. This trend is true for other land use decisions as well. As such, any discussion about US water infrastructure must include recognition for environmental racism that is worsening the already disparate impact of sparse investment.

Inequitable Affordability & Access

Water access is not experienced equally across the US. Black and Latino 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. Since 2000, household water costs have [more than doubled](#), in part due to the nationwide lack of investment in water systems. These costs 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 urban 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 LA, analysis shows that majority-Black communities are [nearly 2.5 times more likely](#) to experience shutoffs than majority-white communities, and majority-Latino communities are 2 times more likely to experience shutoffs.

Rural farmworker communities, which are overwhelmingly comprised of Latino communities, 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 Latino 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 is very expensive compared to tap water.

Photo credit: Martin do Nascimento, California Health Report

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').

Water Safety Concerns

For the water that comes out of our taps to be safe for daily consumption, it must first be heavily treated to remove high concentrations of both natural and man-made contaminants, as established in the federally mandated Safe Drinking Water Act.

However, **over 77 million people in the US are served by water systems that violate these health-based standards.**

This means that many Americans are drinking water containing contaminants that are detrimental to health - some of these contaminants are potentially carcinogenic, damaging to reproductive health, or harmful to the early development of babies and children. Communities of color bear a high burden, with [around 70%](#) of those exposed to water quality violations that could impact health classed as 'socially vulnerable', under a range of factors including race, disability, and housing vacancy rates. Studies have shown that [contaminants like arsenic and uranium](#) are consistently found at higher concentrations in Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities nationwide.

Even water systems not officially deemed to be violating EPA standards might be afflicted with water quality issues due to regulations that haven't met need. The EPA [regulates 91 contaminants](#) in drinking water, but this list was drafted in 1974 and has not kept pace with scientific research and public health data. Many chemicals have since been found to pose health risks at much smaller concentrations than previously thought - yet many of these standards [have not been updated since the 1980s.](#)

Furthermore, it is estimated that more than 60,000 chemicals are used within the US, and yet only 91 contaminants have legal limits placed upon them at all; between 2000 and 2023, no new contaminants were added to the list. This means that many potentially harmful contaminants are not being monitored or regulated at all. This is particularly worrying for Black and Latino 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.

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Climate Change Impacts

The Earth's climate is warming due to continued extraction and burning of fossil fuels and a general 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 from insects, and namely, water scarcity and sea level rise.

Quick fact:

Globally, over [1.7 billion people](#) use a drinking water source contaminated by sewage.



Photo credit: The New York Times

Quick fact:

The [World Health Organization](#) estimates that the current global water stress will increase in part due to climate change.

The effects of climate change put further pressure on already belabored water systems across the US, as our changing environment makes water supply more unpredictable than ever. Weather extremes across the country are becoming increasingly common, with both [flooding and droughts becoming more frequent](#). This means that water supplies are increasingly erratic and unpredictable, which puts pressure on water systems as more complex and more expensive ways of managing water are required.

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 our water supply effectively, so this can cause raised water prices for consumers. To make matters worse, it is likely that not all of these contaminants are successfully removed from the water supply. This is a huge barrier for water equity, since, as stated above, Black households are [75% more likely](#) than others to live near facilities that produce hazardous waste, and so are more likely to be affected by polluted drinking water. Also, 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.

SYNOPSIS:

- The US has massively underinvested in water infrastructure, which is having far reaching consequences especially on communities of color.
- Environmental racism is the reality that race is the best predictor of the amount of environmental burden faced by a community, and this connects back to water concerns.
- Black, Latino, and Indigenous communities are more likely than their White counterparts to be without indoor plumbing, and these populations also often pay more for water.
- Water treatment and regulation has not met demand, so millions of Americans do not have safe, 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.



These two photos show the same water reservoir in California, but the image on the left was taken during a year of drought, whereas the image on the right was taken in 2023 after prolonged heavy rainfall. Photo credit: Justin Sullivan, Getty Images.

Water Equity in California & South Los Angeles

While it is important to have a bird's eye view of the water concerns facing the Country today, as a Southern California resident, it's critical that you have access to the information you deserve on your water. The next few pages of the guide focus on water equity in California and in South Los Angeles. Read on for 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 what 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. After many years of water use restrictions, residents across the state experienced over [30 atmospheric river storms in 2023](#), leading to record snowfall and flooding.

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 2023, more than 1 million California residents were exposed to unsafe drinking water from their taps, and over 2.5 million were at a high risk of their water bill being unaffordable to them. These burdens affect communities of color and low-income communities disproportionately. 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!

In 2023, [more than 1 million](#) California residents were exposed to unsafe drinking water from their taps.

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 Indigenous groups included the Ventureño Chumash, Fernandeano Tataviam, and Gabrieleno-Tongva peoples. By 1500, these groups established semi-permanent villages 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.

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](#).



LA River, 1937.

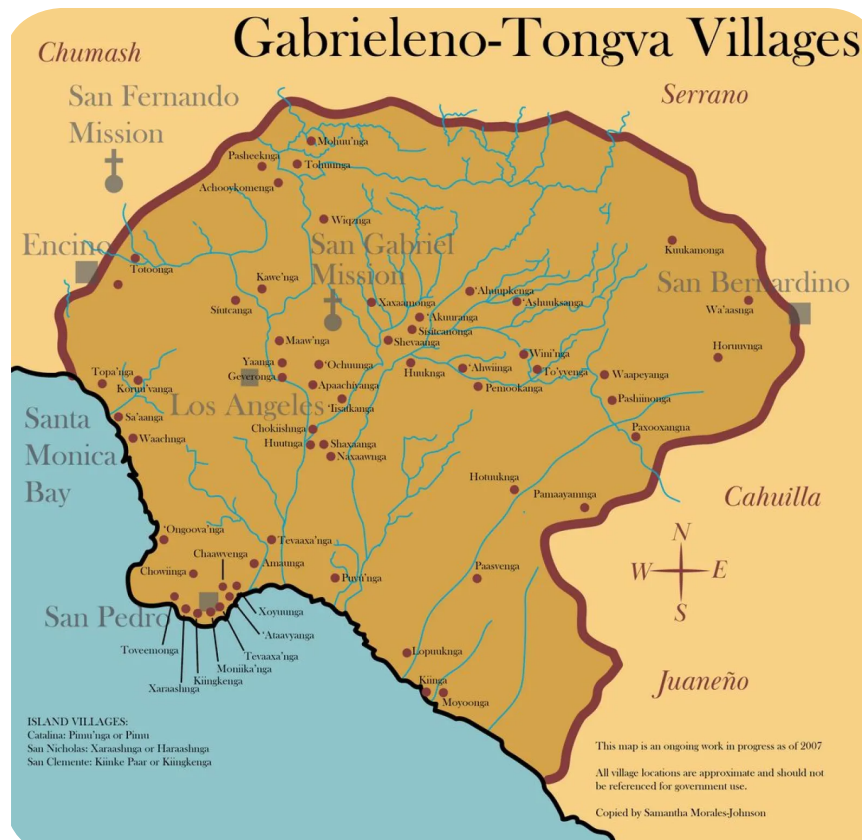


Image credit: Samantha Morales Johnson, San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians

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 Latino 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, 1 in 8 US residents lives in California. 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.

Discriminatory property laws and broader systems of discrimination excluded Black and Latino communities from owning or residing on land near water.

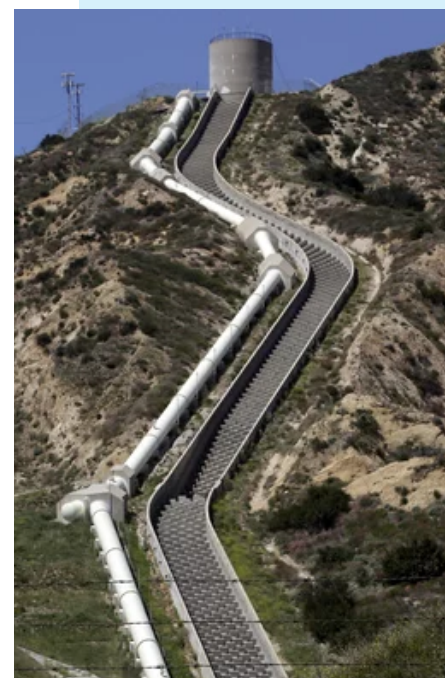
In recent decades, injustices in California's water history have continued, as communities of color have consistently been denied water equity. Through much of the 20th century, discriminatory property laws and broader systems of discrimination excluded Black and Latino communities from owning or residing 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 are controlled by White people, giving people of color little to no say over water planning processes.

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



Quick fact:

The first Governor of California, Peter Burnett, [owned slaves in Tennessee](#) before moving West; he dreamed of California being for White people only.



Water Governance & Important California Water Laws



Photo credit: California Coastkeeper Alliance

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 substantially 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.

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, [race is consistently found](#) to bear the strongest relationship to slow, ineffective enforcement of federal water laws.

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 for the better, since so many layers of governing bodies are involved. It makes it very difficult to secure water equity for South Los Angeles and other areas of the state that need government funding.

California 2023 State Water Board

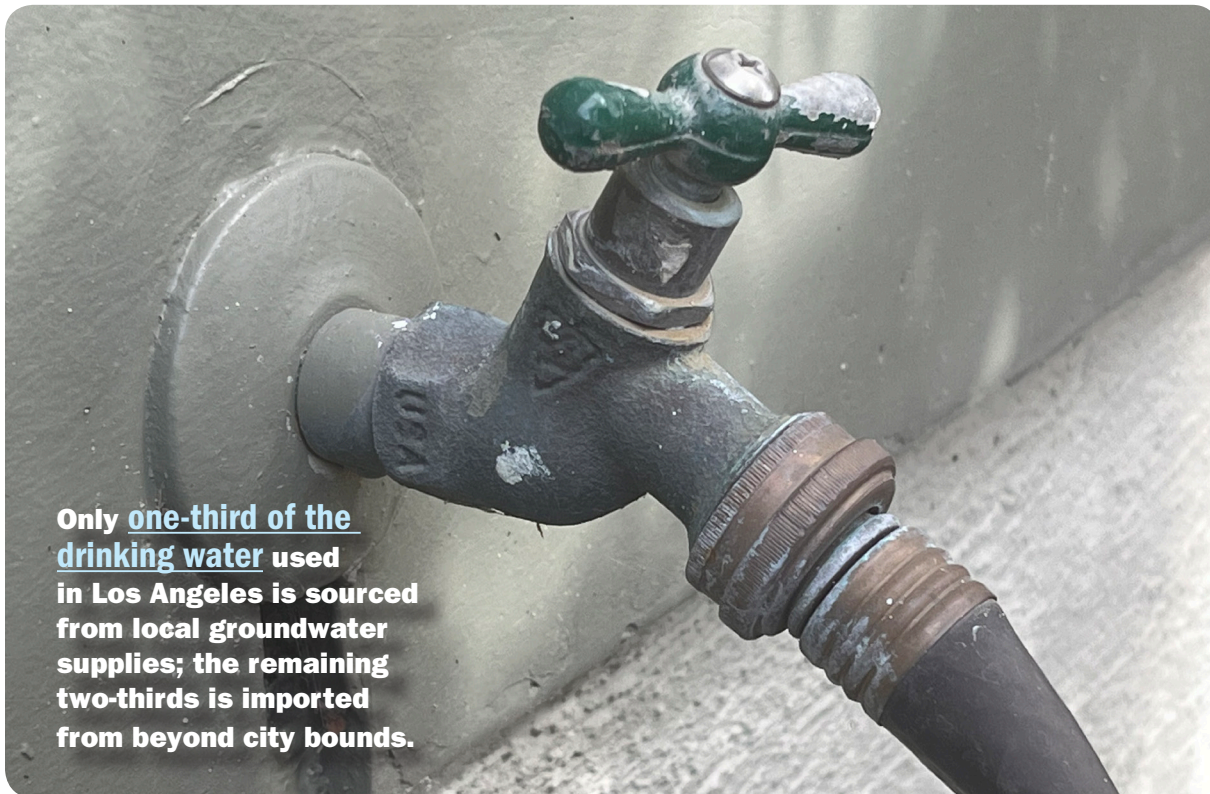
[Drinking Water Assessment](#)



Where Does Our Water in South Los Angeles Come From?

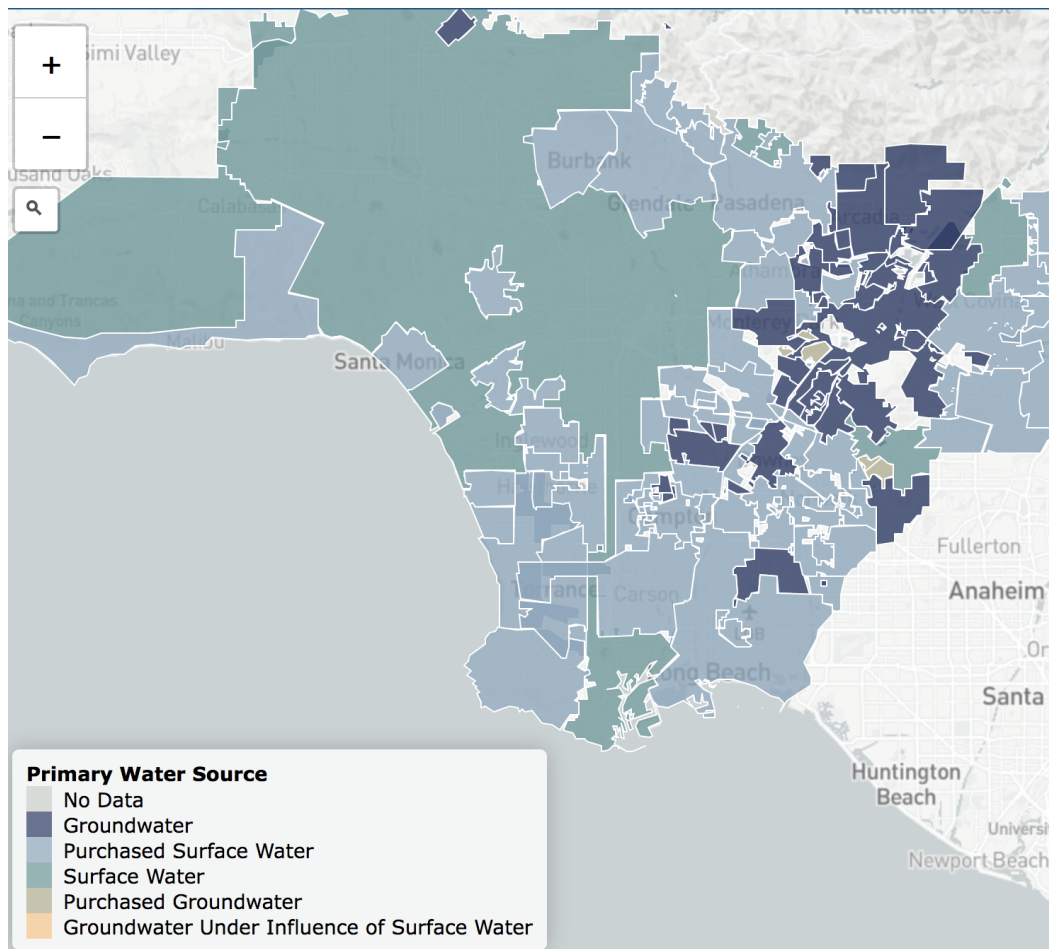
Water rates in South Los Angeles are some of the highest in California, and historically, some areas in South Los Angeles have experienced more water quality issues than other parts of Los Angeles County. To understand why water affordability and quality have suffered so much in our area, we need to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

In Los Angeles we are constantly running low on water, given our geographical location and the 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 is sourced from local groundwater supplies; the remaining two-thirds is imported from beyond city bounds.



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 snowmelt from the Sierra Nevada mountains, which is transported to Los Angeles and other locations around the state 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 from distant sources is very expensive, and also potentially very damaging to the ecosystems 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 city limits. In the long-term, Los Angeles city officials and water suppliers plan to reduce our reliance on imported water by enlarging the city's capacity to recycle wastewater, capturing a greater amount of stormwater for everyday use, and increasing clean groundwater supplies to expand water supply from local sources. In 2019, Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti committed to [recycling 100% of the city's wastewater by 2035](#), thus significantly decreasing dependence on imported water. A lessened dependence on imported water is absolutely key to securing water equity for South Los Angeles, as importing water creates barriers to water quality and affordability.



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/>.

Quick fact:

Imported water is often more polluted than locally sourced water and needs to be treated more thoroughly and using increasingly sophisticated technology.



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

The fact that so much of our water is imported from afar means that ensuring water equity within Los Angeles is becoming increasingly complicated. In order to safely and efficiently import water, complex water infrastructure and water management are required - this ends up being very technical, and also very expensive.

Each year, it takes millions of dollars to import such a high percentage of our water supply from other regions. Importing water is expensive because:

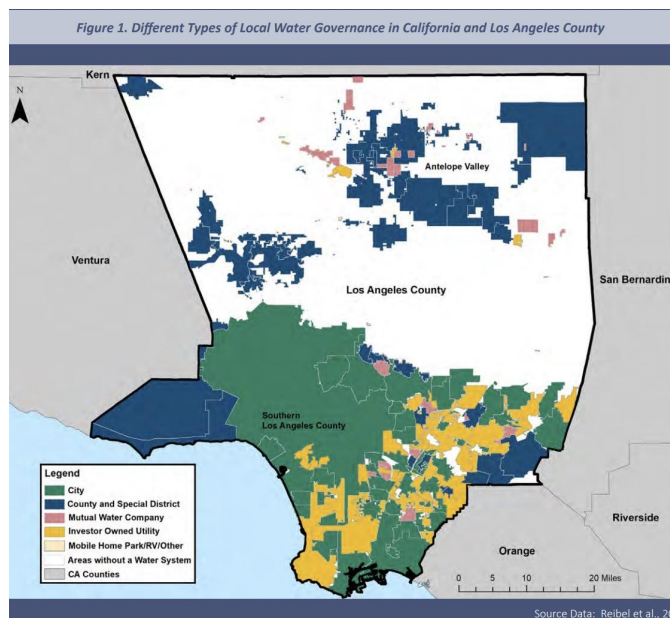
- The further water has to travel before it is processed and comes out of our taps, the more time there is for it to pick up contaminants from the surrounding environment. Therefore, imported water is often more polluted than locally sourced water and needs to be treated more thoroughly and using increasingly sophisticated technology.
- Moving water over long distances to reach Los Angeles is a high energy process, which is resource intensive and, therefore, 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 it more expensive for water systems supplying local households to obtain, process, and eventually get water into our taps.

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 Los Angeles County on the whole, there are approximately 209 different water utility suppliers, and in South Los Angeles in particular, there are at least 57 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 Los Angeles operates on smaller, investor-owned water systems, which has led to a higher concentration of systems operating with contaminant violations.

The fact that South Los Angeles has a lot of small and medium sized water suppliers is significant because smaller water systems are far 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.



Some communities in South Los Angeles end up paying significantly more for their water



The photos of pipes to the left and water bottles below shows the Sativa Water District in Compton in 2018, when a high level of manganese in the water supply turned water brown, an example of how serious the fragility of smaller water utilities can be, since with their limited resources, small water utilities tend to only invest in infrastructure if it breaks or fails. Yet, by this point, as in Sativa, a crisis might already have hit, and the water consumed by communities of color might be unsafe for use and consumption.

Source for top and right photos: Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, Presentation at Sativa Water Systems Community Meeting, February 19, 2020





Section 2: What Can You Do?

Renter

Spotlight:

60% of Angelenos are renters. Since many renters pay their water bills through their landlords rather than getting a personal bill themselves, check out these renter spotlights for special insights.



Photo credit: Prostock-Studio, Getty Images

So, What Can You Do?

If you skim through nothing else, please check out section 2 of this guide! Section 2, “What Can You Do,” is intended to help you get 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, what to do if your water suddenly becomes discolored or tastes funny, and of course, renter specific spotlights. The guide’s conclusion also includes some information about advocacy efforts and the necessity of structural change to secure water equity.

Water Quality

Human Health & Water

There is a strong link between water and public health, which is perhaps unsurprising since our bodies are made up largely of water (graphic). The UN estimates that adults need between [13 and 26 gallons](#) of water per day to meet their basic needs.

Quick Fact:

Around [7.2 million Americans](#) each year get sick from diseases spread through water.

Clean water is particularly central to maintaining the health of vulnerable groups who bear a high risk of contracting and suffering poor effects from waterborne diseases - this includes children, pregnant people, the elderly, and the immunocompromised. The connection between water equity and reproductive justice is particularly clear here, as contaminated drinking water poses a particular threat to pregnant women and children. For pregnant women, contaminants in unclean water have the [potential to cross the placenta](#) and affect the development of the fetus, and also to be present in breast milk. Unsafe water might also cause premature birth, which might cause health complications for both mother and baby. For children, unclean water can have an outsized impact because children drink more water relative to their body weight than adults. Since their immune systems, brains, and organs haven't yet fully developed, unclean water might cause cognitive and developmental problems.

As established in Section 1 of this guide, our water in California is heavily regulated and subject to some of the strictest water quality requirements in the United States. However, there are good reasons to question our water quality here in South Los Angeles:

- There are many well-documented problems with the provision of safe water throughout the country.
- There has been long-standing disinvestment in South Los Angeles and in communities of color, including in water infrastructure in the area.
- Small water utilities are very prevalent in South Los Angeles, which lack resources and are not subject to high levels of regulatory oversight.
- While the law requires over 90 contaminants in our water to be treated, there are thousands more that are currently unregulated, and might have health impacts.



Renter Spotlight:

In Los Angeles, all rental properties built on or before October 1st, 1978 are covered under the City's [Rent Stabilization Ordinance](#), meaning that tenants in these units have more protections and landlords have to register their rental units as rent stabilized with the City. Unfortunately, lead water pipes were not banned until 1986, so renters in Rent Stabilized units should be aware that it is more likely for lead to be in homes built before 1978.

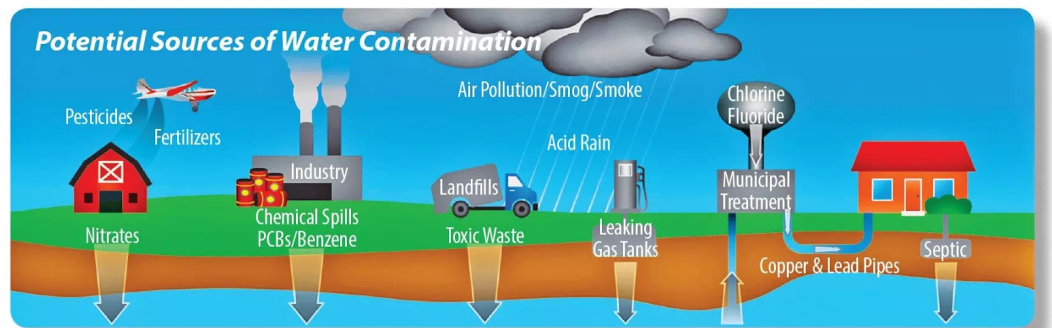
The EPA regulates over 90 known contaminants in our tap water, trying to ensure that contaminant levels in public drinking water do not exceed set Maximum Contaminant Levels

Potential Water Contaminants

There are some contaminants, like lead, that are detrimental to human health at any concentration.

There are a great number of potential contaminants in the water supplied to our taps. Some of these contaminants occur in water naturally, whereas others come from human activities like sewage discharge, industrial waste, or agricultural runoff. However, it is worth noting that while the word ‘contaminant’ has negative connotations, not all contaminants are bad for public health. For example, [appropriate levels of disinfectant](#) like chlorine or chloramine might be present in your water and are considered contaminants, even though they protect your health and kill harmful waterborne germs. Fluoride is another naturally occurring contaminant that is purposefully allowed in our tap water, since [a low level of fluoride supports tooth enamel](#), prevents tooth decay, and leads to fewer cavities.

However, even those contaminants that can promote health at controlled levels can be detrimental at higher concentrations. Moreover, there are some contaminants, like lead, that are detrimental to human health at any concentration. The EPA regulates over [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, and MCLs for those contaminants that are regulated have not been updated since 2000, despite relevant scientific studies linking some of these contaminants to poor health outcomes. Furthermore, it is possible that some contaminants might not cause health impacts in the short-term, but might be toxic over a lifetime.



US Geological Survey

Lead

- [Lead](#) is a naturally occurring heavy metal, but largely enters the water supply due to human activities, from older lead-containing pipes and industrial releases
- Lead accumulates in the body over time and is toxic at any concentration
- There is no safe level of lead for children

Potential health impacts include:

- Cardiac disease
- Nerve disorders
- Muscle and joint pain
- Cancer
- Cognitive and developmental issues, especially for children
- Reproductive issues for pregnant women, including miscarriage, stillbirth, and low birth weight

Chromium-6

- [Chromium-6](#) is a tasteless and odorless metallic element
- Chromium-6 enters the water supply through wastewater that has been contaminated by
- industrial processes
- Chromium-6 has been widely found in drinking water across Los Angeles County, and it has been detected in particularly high concentrations in South Los Angeles

Potential health impacts include:

- Respiratory problems
- Stomach and intestinal tumors/cancer
- Digestive issues
- Developmental issues in children

Arsenic

- [Arsenic](#) is a naturally occurring heavy metal, which is also a by-product of certain agricultural and industrial processes
- Arsenic has no smell, taste, or color when dissolved in water
- Both short-term and long-term side effects are associated with arsenic, which is toxic in high concentrations

Potential health impacts include:

- Cancer and skin lesions
- Cardiovascular disease
- Diabetes
- Negative impacts on cognitive development in children and young adults

Nitrates

- [Nitrates](#) are a naturally occurring set of compounds that are very commonly found in drinking water and are in many vegetables at a low concentration
- Nitrates might enter water supplies through human activities such as agricultural runoff and sewage wastewater
- High concentrations of nitrates pose a particular risk to babies and to infants

Potential health impacts include:

- Baby blue syndrome', where babies lack sufficient oxygen and are at risk of infection, coma, or even death
- Low birth weights for newborns
- Digestive and urinary issues

PFAS

- [PFAS](#) 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
 - A 2007 study showed that 97% of Americans had PFAS in their blood, although this number has since decreased due to the phase out of some PFAS chemicals
- PFAS are not currently regulated in our drinking water, although this may change soon

Potential health impacts include:

- High cholesterol and liver enzyme changes
- Thyroid disruption
- Increased risk of kidney and testicular cancers
- Reproductive issues such as low birth weight and PFAS in breast milk

Manganese

- [Manganese](#) is a mineral found both in natural sources and as a result of human activities, such as industrial discharge and use of certain cleaning supplies, cosmetics, and fertilizers
- Manganese is an essential nutrient at low doses, but it can cause health concerns at higher concentrations
- When found in water supplies, manganese often causes staining and might turn your water and the fixtures surrounding it brown or red

Potential health impacts include:

- Neurological issues in adults and infants
- Negative impacts on cognitive development in children

Quick Fact:

LADWP is the largest municipal utility in the entire country.

What About Your Water?

While it is ultimately the responsibility of your water utility, CalEPA, and other regulatory bodies to ensure that your water is safe and clean - in other words, it isn't fair that we have to spend time worrying about our water quality - there are things you can do at home to understand and then mitigate worries about your own tap water.

First, knowledge is power - to judge the safety of your own tap water, it is crucial to know which water utility is responsible for your water supply, and where they are getting their water from.

Once you've educated yourself about your water, pass that knowledge along to your friends, family, and neighbors. The more informed we are, the easier it is to protect our health!

Step 1 = Identifying Your Water Utility

Before anything else, it is important to know who supplies your tap water. If you don't already know this, you can check your latest utility bill to find the name of your water utility. Otherwise, if you don't have access to your bill or are not responsible for paying your bill, you can use [this link](#) to identify your provider based on your zip code or full address.

Identify your water utility:



Step 2 = Finding 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.

Renter Spotlight:

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 access to cold and hot water, that there are no plumbing leaks, and that your unit is connected to a sewage disposal system.

Renter Spotlight:

As a renter, even if you pay through your landlord, you are still owed access to your utility's Water Quality Report.

If you couldn't find your Water Quality Report, or if you would like a different breakdown, there are other resources that you can use to discover some important facts about your water quality. Environmental Working Group's tap water database, last updated in 2021, 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. The database compares these contaminant levels to EPA mandated legal limits, as well as lower limits that have been recommended by environmentalists and public health advocates.

EWG'S Tap Water [Database](#)



Step 3 = Understanding Your Water Quality Report

Your Water Quality Report might be laid out differently depending on your particular water utility, but at minimum, each report 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 brief summary of the state's assessment of your water source, which should list all detected regulated contaminants and their concentration levels
- The potential health effects of any contaminants detected at a level that violates EPA standards
- An explanation of how the public can participate in any upcoming decisions that affect the quality of local drinking water

If you need help reading the more technical parts of your Water Quality Report, the Community Water Center created a helpful [guide sheet](#) that explains the various numbers included in the report and what you should look out for.

[How to read your Water Quality Report](#)



Photo credit: Abigail Clarkin

If you are worried about the possibility of harmful contaminants in your drinking water, the simplest way to address this worry is to purchase and use a filter for the water that you consume.



In researching water filters, you should try to pick out a water filter that is labeled and/or advertised as NSF-certified.

What If I Want More Information Beyond My Water Quality Report?

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 worry that your tap water might be affected by any of these issues involving aging pipes and household infrastructure, the Water Quality Report is less helpful, since it cannot tell you what happened to your tap water after it left the treatment plant. 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 \$20 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.

Next Steps: What Actions Can You Take?

Now that you're equipped with some knowledge about the quality of your water, what's next? Perhaps you want to take control of your own water consumption at home; or you might want to know even more about water quality in South Los Angeles; or maybe you're wondering how these concerns about water quality might be addressed in the long-term. If any of this applies to you, then this section provides resources that you might find useful!

Water Filters

If you are worried about the possibility of harmful contaminants in your drinking water, the simplest way to address this worry is to purchase and use a filter for the water that you consume. Here, we will provide you with some information about different types of water filters, factors to consider when choosing a filter, and also some resources that can recommend effective and affordable water filter products.

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, with annual filter pitcher costs ranging from [\\$32 to \\$180](#). 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](#).

In choosing which kind of water filter to purchase, it is important to make an informed decision about the particular device that you are buying. The efficiency of water filters varies hugely between brands, and the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) has established standards for water filters to assess their performance. Companies are not required to meet these standards, however, so **you should try to pick out a water filter that is labeled and advertised as NSF-certified.**



If you are experiencing a major problem with your tap water, Black Women for Wellness wants to know about it, and will provide you with as much support and information as possible!

In addition, different water filters are better suited than others at tackling specific contaminants. So 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.

A final thing to note about water pitcher filtration systems is that you must be diligent about changing the filter regularly, or they can end up more [more harm than good](#). Some filters have indicator lights to show you when a change is required, while others might recommend changes measured in months or depending on how many gallons of water have been filtered. 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! This is because activated carbon works through absorption, so it removes impurities from tap water by acting as a sponge to attract and take in contaminant molecules. Over time, these contaminant molecules build up, so if you never change your filter then these contaminants might start leaking back into the water. Also, your old and grimy filter might then risk becoming a breeding ground for bacteria, which wasn't even in your tap water to start with! Changing your water filter is important for your health, since it maintains the safety of your filtered water.

Helpful Water Filter information:

- This [water filter guide](#) explains which water filtration system might be best for you depending on your priorities (cost, efficiency, contaminant type).
- This [infographic](#) from the water filter guide shows three major types of water filtration systems, and the limitations of each.
- This [NSF page](#) lists all water filtration systems that meet the NSF certification of efficiency, and might be useful if you want to check whether your existing water filter is up to scratch.
- If you are particularly worried about PFAS contaminating your water, here is a [2023 report](#) about water filtration systems that work best to reduce PFAS in tap water.

Step-by-Step Guide to Choosing a Water Filter

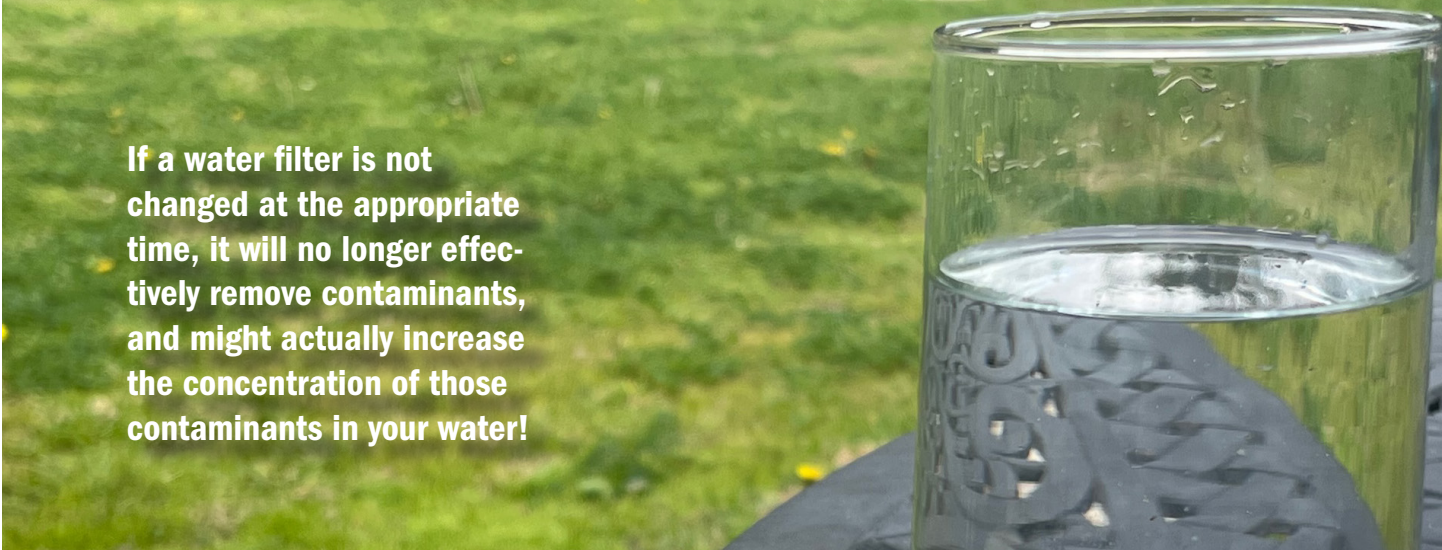
1. Educate yourself. As shared in the above section, educate yourself about the particular water concerns you have. Try writing down the contaminants you particularly want to filter for such as lead, PFAS, nitrates, etc.

2. Know your options. There are various types of water filters for tap water. A popular option is a pitcher that can be stored in a refrigerator or a countertop, but there are also options that connect straight to the tap on your sink. There are also filter attachments for showers if you are particularly concerned about the hardness of your water, or in other words, water with a high mineral content that can be irritating or drying to the skin.

3. Find the best fit. Once you know what kind of filtration you are looking for, you can check out the various guides above to determine which specific filtration system would be best for you and your family. Remember - while purchasing a pitcher or tap attachment is the main upfront cost, some filters have more or less expensive replacements and that is a recurring cost throughout the life of the device.

4. Read instructions. Once you purchase and receive your filtration system, follow the instructions on the filter for installation. Many filters require being rinsed with cool water before being inserted into your device. After installment, consider creating a replacement tracking system. You could set a reminder in your phone or put a note on your refrigerator to replace the filter based on that filter's instructions.

5. Change your filter. Change your filter as required and enjoy your safer water! Typically, filters must be changed after a certain amount of gallons of water usage. If you have many people using the device, you may need to change it more regularly and vice versa.

A photograph of a clear glass filled with water, sitting on a dark, textured surface. The background is a blurred green lawn with some yellow flowers. The glass has a decorative pattern on its lower half.

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!

How to Report Major Issues With Your 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 crucial steps that you might 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 Black Women for Wellness.** 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!

[CalEPA Environmental Complaint System:](#)



[Find](#) your local and state representatives:



Los Angeles County Department of Public Health [Complaint:](#)



**BLACK WOMEN
FOR WELLNESS**

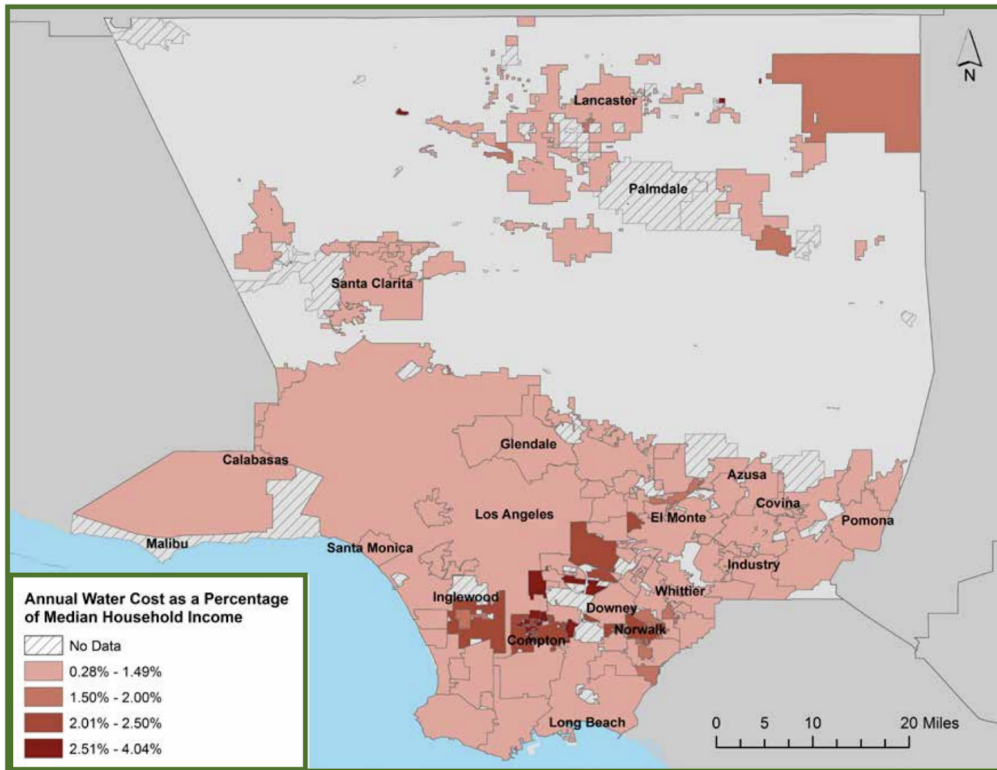
For information:

Black Women for Wellness:

<https://bwwla.org/>

@bw4wla

ANNUAL WATER COST AS A PERCENTAGE OF MEDIAN HOUSEHOLD INCOME



Source: UCLA Luskin Center for Innovation, see "Methodology: Water Pricing, Cost and Affordability"

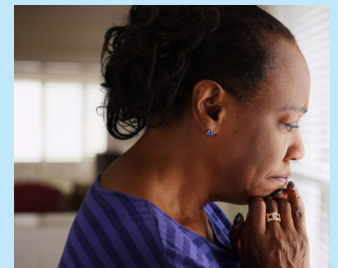
Across California, millions of households are struggling with water affordability. In 2021, a survey showed that 12% of households in the state were behind on water bills.

Water Affordability

California's Water Debt Crisis

Across California, [millions of households](#) are struggling with water affordability. In 2021, a survey showed that 12% of households in the state were behind on water bills, with Californians owing over \$1 billion statewide. This debt is most concentrated in Los Angeles, and has ballooned since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, exacerbated by pandemic-related illness, job loss, and ongoing health complications. Since so many people sheltered in place, members of many households were forced out of offices and into their homes, which decreased income while increasing home utility bills. The problem is particularly acute with water bills, as water rates have risen more rapidly than inflation and [all other utility costs](#) in the past decade - at some points, the price of water has increased at [6x times](#) the rate of inflation.

Both 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](#) shows, households in South Los Angeles spend a higher proportion of their income on water than other households across the city - these are predominantly Black households. Furthermore, COVID-19's effect on water debt in California disproportionately hit low-income Black and Latino households, just as the effects of contracting the coronavirus were [disproportionately deadly](#) for communities of color. The pandemic worsened racial inequities in the workplace, in schooling, and in health care coverage - so low-income Black households are particularly likely to have a high water debt burden.



This disparity is worsened by the fact that water rates are highly variable across Los Angeles, with small water utilities sometimes charging more than larger utilities - this is particularly troubling, since there are 57 water utilities in South Los Angeles, and many of these are small suppliers.

Across Los Angeles, it has been shown that some households might pay [as little as \\$200](#) per year for water, while comparable households covered by a different water utility might pay over \$2000 for the same amount of water. Yet just as water rates vary across Los Angeles, so do the levels of utility assistance available to households that are struggling to pay their water bills. Particularly small water utilities sometimes lack the resources and funding to provide substantial debt relief or financial assistance for their customers - even though these customers might be the ones most in need of such relief.

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.

Renter Spotlight:

For the [Low Income Household Water Assistance Program](#), if you pay for water through your rent, you might still qualify pending an agreement with your landlord.

[EPA water bill guide:](#)



Low Income Relief & Debt Relief Programs

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, and for those using life-support equipment.

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 utility suppliers that have 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.

- [California Extended Water and Wastewater Arrearage Payment Program.](#)

This is a one-time debt relief program that aims to help households struggling with water debts that were accrued during the COVID-19 pandemic, between March 4, 2020 and December 31, 2022. Water utility suppliers will receive this money and directly credit debt relief to their customers towards the end of 2023. You cannot apply directly for this program, but you can ask your water utility if they are participating in the program, and encourage them to do so.

The best way to find out if you qualify for assistance is to consult the website of your water utility, 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 if you explain your particular financial concern to them.

How to Aim For Efficient Water Usage in the Home

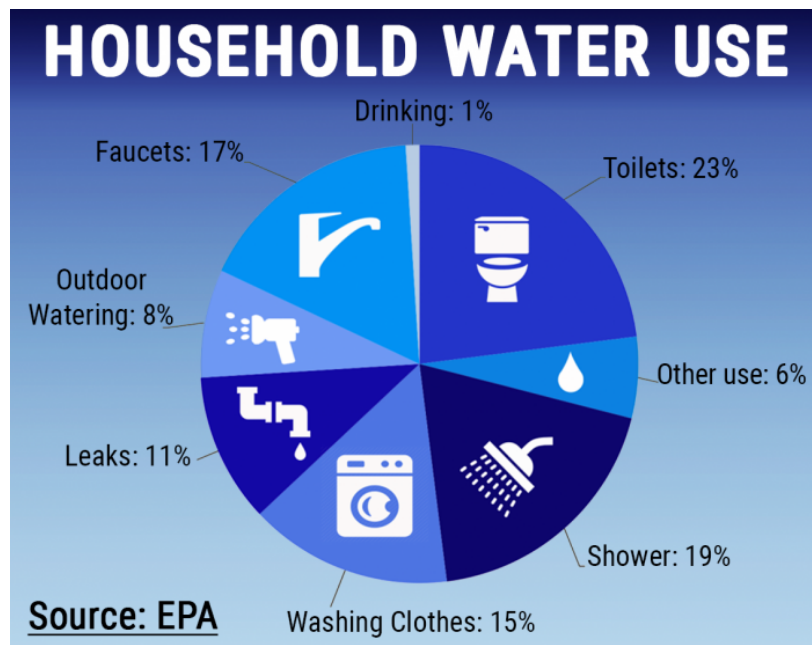
If you have persistent water affordability concerns, the most important thing to do is to identify debt relief or utility assistance that might be available to you, as outlined in the previous section - however, you might also consider trying to maximize the efficiency of water usage in your home. There are three major ways to do this, which will be explained over the next two pages of the guide.

1. By trying to acquire higher efficiency devices and appliances - this might save you money in the short-term in the form of rebates from your water supplier, and in the long-term by lowering your water bill.

2. By reducing the amount of water accidentally wasted in daily life, lowering your water bill.

3. By collecting rainwater and/or wastewater to use for household chores that don't require potable water, therefore lowering your water bill.

Note: Being efficient with your water only influences the affordability of your water if your water bill is variable, and reflects your water usage. If you pay a flat fee each month, being water efficient will not impact your bill. However, it will still promote water sustainability more broadly, which is especially important in California given the rise in extreme weather events brought about by climate change.



1 - Obtaining Water Efficient Household Appliances and Devices

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.

Whether you are a renter or a homeowner, the simplest way to conserve water in your home is to affix water saving devices onto your sinks and shower heads, which reduce the volume of water released. Some water utilities even provide these devices free of charge or heavily subsidized. For example...

Any LADWP customer can pick up the [following water conservation devices](#) from any LADWP Customer Service Center, free of charge:

Bathroom faucet aerators

Kitchen faucet aerators

Showerheads

Toilet leak detection dye tablets

[LA County](#) and [other water purveyors](#), beyond the LADWP, also offer free conservation kits! These kits can be ordered online, or you can call and provide your mailing address to have a kit sent to you. While many of these programs target homeowners and those paying their own water bills, often there is flexibility if you call and mention that you are a tenant or renter.

LA County free conservation kits:



California Water Service free conservation kits:



In addition, if you are purchasing new water-using appliances, rebates are widely available to encourage customers to choose water efficient appliances. Over 100 water utilities across Los Angeles offer rebates directly to their customers, and the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California operates a general [SoCal Water\\$mart rebate program](#). This means that you can get money back after making your purchase, and that in the long run your appliances will use less water, thus also saving you money. For specific rebates available to you, check out the Social Water\$mart program, and also your water utility's website.

Renter Spotlight:

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 the [FAQs](#) page for more information.

It is common for the following appliances to be covered by rebates:

Washing machines

High-efficiency toilets

Refrigerators

Backyard/frontyard watering systems

2 - Reducing Water Waste in Daily Household Activities

It is also possible to save money in the home by using water more efficiently in daily and weekly activities. This does not mean depriving yourself of water that you and your family need, but simply involves cutting down on water waste - the kinds of water uses that are bad both for the environment and for your wallet.

These water saving habits can save a [significant](#) amount of [water](#).

WATER SAVING TIPS

Turn your tap off while you brush your teeth

Shorten your daily shower from 10 to 5 minutes

Fill your bathtub to the halfway point instead of all the way to the top

If possible, run 1 full dishwasher load instead of handwashing dirty dishes

If handwashing dishes, turn tap on to rinse instead of running it constantly

Wash 1 full laundry load rather than 2 half load

Fix leaks

AMOUNT OF WATER SAVED

3 gallons each time

10 gallons each time

17-20 gallons per bath

15 gallons each time

2.5 gallons per minute

21 gallons

27-90 gallons of water each day

3 - Collecting & Reusing Rainwater and/or Wastewater

We use water in many of our household chores, and for some of these chores potable water - water that is safe for drinking - is not needed. 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. Rain barrels are affordable, and rebates are often available for their purchase. City agencies have also distributed them for free in the past, so it's worth keeping your eyes peeled for this. Using rainwater to complete household tasks can greatly cut down on water usage in the home, which is both good for the planet and also good for your water bills. Note that there are also [other more complex methods](#) of harvesting rainwater for your home, if this idea appeals to you; and 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/backyard use.
Photo credit: Sustainable Milton*





Bottled Water vs Tap Water

Bottled water is not usually a good alternative to tap water!

Here at Black Women for Wellness, we recommend drinking filtered tap water, 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 a safer alternative to tap water. Bottled water is often lower quality than tap water and is contaminated by harmful chemicals in plastic bottles, and it is also far more expensive.

Bottled water is typically far worse for your health than tap water:

Quick fact:

[500 billion plastic bottles](#) are sold annually around the world.

- The plastic that water bottles are made from contain over 300 chemicals - **over 150 of these can leach into the water you drink**, and negatively affect your health.
- [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 treat bottled water as a food and [cannot require certified lab testing or violation reporting](#).

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 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 poorer and more rural communities to sell elsewhere is unjust.
- The [production of plastic bottles](#) and their disposal is **bad for human health and the environment**.



Bottled water is more expensive than tap water, and Food and Water Watch reported that 64% of bottled water is actually just up-charged tap water.

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, and 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 - but it must be stressed that **these water quality issues are not your fault, and it's not possible or desirable for you tackle all of the problems 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 governments to intervene to correct these wrongs.

On the national, state, and city level, a variety of organizations and elected representatives are pushing for legislative 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. One particularly notable policy change at the federal level is the [EPA's March 2023 proposal](#) to add six PFAS or “forever chemicals” to the list of contaminants that must be regulated in our drinking water. The regulation will potentially go into effect in early 2024, and if it does, the EPA estimates that it will prevent thousands of deaths and lessen tens of thousands of serious PFAS-related illnesses. There is also ongoing advocacy around water affordability, with efforts to pass policy that would improve low-income water rate assistance and expand protections from water shutoffs due to unpaid bills.

Here at Black Women for Wellness, we are continuing to to develop our environmental justice program which includes our work on water equity. Stay tuned to our [BWW website](#), emails and [social media](#) for further water equity related updates, or for any structural next steps that could be led by community participation!



November 2023, Black Women for Wellness co-hosted a Water Equity in South LA Town Hall. Stay tuned for further events, resources, and updates!

Tools for Understanding Your Tap Water

The federal [EPA website](#) offers basic information about safe drinking water standards and regulations, and other questions related to your tap water.

The [Safe to Drink portal](#) is overseen by state government agencies and CalEPA, and provides information and FAQs about your tap water, and additional links if you would like to investigate your water quality further.

The interactive [LA County Water System Governance Map](#) is hosted by UCLA, and offers statistics, bill information, and relevant links about your water utility supplier.

This [Human Right to Water Data Tool](#) is overseen by a government agency attached to CalEPA, and provides interactive data about water quality, water affordability, and water accessibility across California. There are separate tabs corresponding to each concern, and the user-friendly interface allows you to zoom in on the map to locate your address, and your water utility.

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 2023 data about water equity throughout Los Angeles. You can also, at the bottom of the page, click on 'List of Water Systems' to find your own water utility, and information about its water quality risk levels.

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.

Faucet aerator: Faucet aerators are small screens that can be attached to sink or shower head faucets, and adjust the flow of water that emerges from your taps. As discussed in Section 2 of the guide, these aerators can reduce the flow emerging from your taps to reduce household water usage.

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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