

Guest editorial: All Californians deserve safe drinking water

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When you paid your electricity and gas bills this month, there was a small line item for a “public purpose surcharge.” This surcharge was there last month, the month before that, and for every month you’ve ever turned on a light.

The primary purpose of this surcharge is to ensure that no Californian is forced to live in cold and darkness because their families make too little money to afford a fundamental necessity of life. All Californians chip in a tiny bit to subsidize reduced utility bills for the least well-off among us.

But what about a resource even more vital and necessary than electricity and gas? What about water? There has never been such a surcharge for water, as it has historically been relatively inexpensive and universally available.

However, in California today, nearly one million Californians, served by 300 water systems in mostly low-income rural communities, no longer have access to safe drinking water.

As a result of aquifers drawn down by years of drought and a buildup of contaminants, the water supply in these communities is no longer safe for drinking, and threatens human health — especially the health of our children.

Despite their lack of access to safe drinking water, these one million Californians continue to pay bills to pipe in water they can only use to flush their toilets – not to drink, bathe, or cook with.

These residents are then forced to buy bottles and jugs of drinking water even though they’re already paying for water to be delivered to their home. This results in the most economically disadvantaged paying more for water than the rest of us.

It is, as Governor Gavin Newsom has said, a situation “unbecoming of who we are and what we stand for” as Californians.

Governor Newsom is advocating that California establish a surcharge for water use similar to that imposed on other utilities.

This surcharge would amount to 95 cents per month for most households, though high water users might experience a slightly higher surcharge.

It is a sensible, fair proposal with a long-standing precedent. It has bipartisan support, and is backed by leading agricultural organizations throughout the state.

Opponents are calling it a “water tax,” language designed to divert attention from the shame of developing world conditions currently plaguing the Golden State. I urge California legislators to see beyond the diversion.

Courageous leadership is required to stare down a situation that is an affront to our shared sense of decency. We must act to fix it. The solution backed by Governor Newsom, similar to one that stalled in the Legislature last year, evenly shares the responsibility for addressing this crisis.

A solution is clear to fix this crisis in many small, low-income communities, and it's before our leaders now.

As Governor Newsom said when he recently visited the San Joaquin Valley, “if we fall short this year, that's on us.”

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