

Four Million Californians Don't Have Access to Clean Water

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Report Exposes Pattern of Discrimination, Calls for Overhaul of Water Policy Coalition of Community Groups Calls For Change

(Oakland, Calif.) - California hides a dirty secret when it comes to water policy. Skin color and income can have a tremendous influence on whether a person has safe drinking water or access to uncontaminated places to fish and swim, according to a new report released today by the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water. *Thirsty for Justice: A People's Blueprint for California Water* documents how water agencies and government regulators neglect or actually harm people of color and low-income communities by failing to protect them from pollution and overuse and excluding them from important decision making processes.

"In a state as rich and prosperous as California, to have millions of people without access to clean drinking water is just not right," said Paola Ramos, Coordinator of the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water. "Too many poor communities have been left out of water projects, locked out of planning efforts, and denied what most of us take for granted. The good news, however, is that we can ensure all Californians have access to clean water by including community voices in water planning and focusing water funding on disadvantaged communities."

Thirsty for Justice was released today in Sacramento, Richmond, Fresno, and Los Angeles by a coalition of community groups, Native American tribes, social justice, public health, and environmental activists who gathered from across the state to draw attention to the widespread exclusion of people of color from the boardrooms where crucial water decisions are made. Residents of urban, industrial areas are demanding that legislators require industries to clean up toxic waste that is contaminating drinking water and fish. Tribal groups are insisting that water agencies protect traditional fishing rights and access to sacred sites when they consider relicensing or raising dams. Rural Central Valley residents want their water boards take responsibility for cleaning up contaminated drinking water.

According to the report, democratic water management is crucial to making clean water available to all. "Large landowners and big-city businesses have long controlled water development from behind closed doors," said John Gibler, a researcher with Public Citizen's Water for All campaign. "Thirsty for Justice shows how California's water problems stem from political mismanagement and greed, not a shortage of water."

The report's recommendations call for a fundamental restructuring of water policy in the state, including: requiring all water users to implement available water conservation and water-use efficiency options before building new dams, reservoirs, or ocean water desalination plants; establishing a subsidized water rate for low-income families; and prohibiting water sales from publicly subsidized water projects.

The Sacramento press conference highlights injustices from *Thirsty for Justice*, such as landlessness and lack of access to water due to dams and diversions specific to Northern

California and the San Joaquin Valley. Speakers address the direct impacts of water transfers and dammed rivers to low-income and people of color communities. Assembly Member Loni Hancock is accompanied by community voices from the Maidu, Karuk and Winnemem Wintu tribes, along with small farmers from Butte County and displaced farm workers.

"Water policy decisions that overlooked the inextricable tie between spiritual practices, tribal livelihoods, and ecosystem management caused the crash of the Karuk fishing economy and a rise in chronic poverty among the Klamath River tribes." the report states. The Winnemem Wintu tribe held a war dance last year to protest the expansion of the Shasta Dam that would have flooded tribal lands, homes and sacred sites. The Winnemem Wintu explain how their struggle to be heard fits into a statewide pattern of injustice from water diversion decisions.

"Water is the lifeblood of California communities; sucking it away from Native tribes and Latino farm workers will only dry up their local economies, their rivers, their fisheries, their farmland and their cultural connections." said Alisha Deen, contributing author. Despite the legacy of injustice facing these communities, a new awareness of water issues is emerging within the Environmental Justice movement; people are mobilizing and taking back control of their water. EJ communities are becoming more and more politically savvy, employing modern strategies to historic injustice. Members of the EJCW will lobby the state capitol on August 17th, demanding political and legislative action to remedy their water injustices.

"Thirsty for Justice is a voice for change," said Amy Vanderwarker, Outreach Coordinator with the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water. "Access to water is a basic human right, and groups across California are demanding that our voices be included so that California's water is managed for the benefit of all."

The Environmental Justice Coalition for Water is a network of more than sixty grassroots and intermediary organizations building a collective, community-based movement for democratic water management and allocation in California. EJCW works to empower community members to become strong voices for water justice in their communities by participating in water policy, planning and decisions. We hold policy makers accountable for the heavy impacts water policy has on low-income communities and communities of color.

Participating Organizations: Butte Environmental Council; California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation; Karuk Tribe; Maidu Cultural & Development Group; Winnemem Wintu Tribe.

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