



The Struggle for Water Justice in the San Joaquin Valley

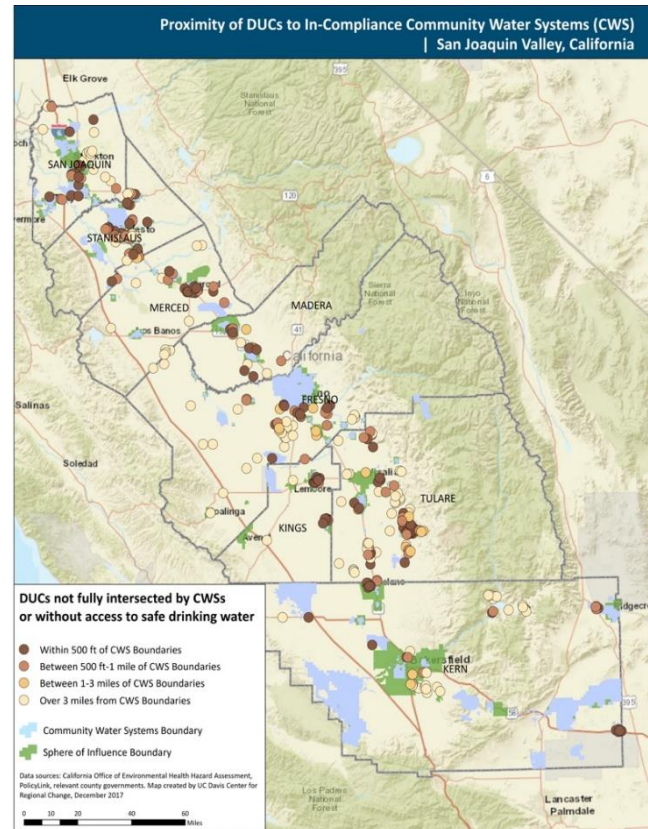
Professor Jonathan K. London, Department of Human Ecology, University of California, Davis

In California, lack of access to clean, safe, and affordable water is a threat to public health and well-being, and violates the state's newly codified Human Right to Water. In low-income communities located outside city boundaries (known as disadvantaged unincorporated communities or DUCs), drinking water is often unsafe to drink due to contamination by nitrates, arsenic, harmful bacteria and industrial by-products, and compromised by inadequate wastewater treatment and disposal systems.

Many DUC residents in the San Joaquin Valley (SJV) pay a triple penalty to obtain safe water: they bear the health costs of unsafe drinking water; they purchase that unsafe water at high costs; and they must also purchase “substitute” water—typically expensive bottled water—for drinking and cooking. Without city governments to directly represent their interests and provide essential services, residents of DUCs have been systematically deprived of access to important means of democratic governance. Today, there are nearly 350,000 people (approximately 1 in 9 of the region's total population) living in 450 DUCs throughout the SJV that are at great risk of exposure to unsafe drinking water.

Key Findings:

- DUC water systems are small, fragmented and underperforming. This results in uneven and inequitable access to safe drinking water.
- Only 62% of DUCs are supplied with safe water. Coupled with those reliant on often unregulated and out-of-compliance domestic wells, about 90,000 people may be exposed to unsafe drinking water.
- Two-thirds of residents living in DUCs not served by a Community Water System (CWS) are Latino. Latinos also make up 63% of the population of DUCs served by out-of-compliance CWSs and 57% of all residents in the SJV served by out-of-compliance CWSs.
- Safe drinking water is often close at hand. Of the residents not served by a CWS or served by an out of compliance system, 44% live within 500 feet of a CWS boundary. 22% live within one mile of a CWS that does or could provide water.



Implications for Policy:

- Develop and strengthen consolidation and extension mandates and incentives for CWSs to serve DUCs.
- Ensure that local governments comply with land use and annexation laws to address the legacies of discriminatory local planning practices.
- Create larger, more stable, equitably distributed, and coordinated sources of funding that focus on addressing historic patterns of inequitable access to resources.
- Improve public access to data and planning tools, enhance existing data systems, and coordinate research efforts.
- Develop new publicly accessible data and mapping tools to improve local and regional planning.