

Safe, Clean Water for Los Angeles County Residents

Questions and Answers

Q: Why does LA County need the Safe, Clean Water Program?

We live in a water-scarce area, and forces outside of our control can threaten our local water resources, including lakes, rivers and beaches. LA County residents rely heavily on imported water from the Sierra Mountains, the Central Valley and even from states as far away as Colorado. Climate change is causing more and more extreme weather conditions, making these remote sources more unreliable. The impacts of the recent five-year drought were widely felt here.

Rainfall is an essential, local source of LA's water. Rain runs through local rivers, creeks and streams and can be absorbed underground, replenishing groundwater, which is a local source of drinking water. However, because so much of our region is paved over, when we *do* experience heavy rain, too much of that precious water is lost to the ocean before we can capture it for use.

Our local water resources are also threatened by toxins and pollution as stormwater runs through streets and over-paved areas into our rivers, creeks and streams. Pollution flows onto our beaches and into the ocean, posing a public health risk and harming marine life.

Q: What would the LA County Safe, Clean Water Program do?

There are smart, modern solutions to help address the challenges we face when it comes to protecting and improving our water resources, our beaches, rivers, creeks and streams. LA County and the Los Angeles County Flood Control District are developing a program based on modern science, technology and nature-based solutions to:

- keep toxins and trash from washing into local lakes, rivers, streams, beaches and the ocean;
- take advantage of less regular, more intense rainstorms in order to save more rainfall and clean it for use, which will mitigate the impact of drought and also protect public health;
- improve communities' protection against extreme weather patterns and climate change while adding natural areas, shade and green space to enjoy.

Q: Is clean water normally scarce in the LA region or did the recent drought cause a water shortage?

Even in years with normal rainfall, LA County is a water-scarce region. The recent five-year drought put even more stress on our local water resources and made our normal situation dramatically worse.

As climate change causes more weather extremes like the drought, we need to take significant steps to protect and improve our local water resources.

Q: I know the drought was seriously harmful for our local water supply, but didn't the heavy rains last winter make up for it?

Unfortunately, no. When we do experience heavy rains, like this past winter, our existing system can only capture a fraction of that rainfall. In fact, during this year's rainstorms, LA County lost over 107 billion gallons of water – enough to meet the needs of more than 2.5 million people for an entire year – nearly 1/3 of the County population.

In addition to missing the opportunity to capture more water, stormwater runoff picks up toxins from parking lots, streets and other developed areas and carries them into our rivers, lakes, streams and eventually our ocean.

As extreme weather conditions become the new normal, we need a system that can capture more local rainfall, and clean and save it for future use.

Q: Do we capture and store rain already when we experience storms? How much rainwater can we capture and store now?

Right now, we capture and store approximately enough rain each year to meet the needs of 1.5 million LA County residents – about 15 percent of our county's population. Existing dams in the front range of the San Gabriel Mountains capture rainfall and stormwater that is conveyed to a network of "spreading grounds" – shallow basins with sandy soil that naturally filter water as it seeps into the ground, refilling local underground natural caverns of rock that hold water. Eventually, this water gets pumped into a water treatment and distribution system for us to use.

Unfortunately, our current system can't capture all the rainfall that occurs in a typical year, and hundreds of billions of gallons of water flow out to the ocean instead of being captured and stored for future use. This stormwater also washes over streets and paved areas, picking up toxins and pollutants, and spreading harmful toxins to our beaches, lakes and rivers.

A major opportunity for a more reliable, local water supply is capturing more rainfall, which we can store underground, clean and re-use.

Q: How much more water could the Safe, Clean Water Program save for our region?

With smart investment, we could double or triple the amount of rain we capture, preserving enough water to meet the needs of nearly one-third of the County's residents, ensuring our region can capitalize on erratic and intense rain events.

Q: What kind of projects would help capture more rainfall?

The best way to capture more water is to rely on natural areas, like streambeds, grassy parks, grassy fields at schools and other non-paved areas. These areas absorb rain naturally and refill our underground reserves.

One of the most exciting parts of the Safe, Clean Water Program is that the projects will use this strategy to not only capture more rain, but to also increase shade, parkland and natural areas for people and wildlife in our area in the process.

Q: Would the Safe, Clean Water Program be better for public health?

Yes. It's no secret that dirty water from heavy storms results in beach closures following heavy rain in Los Angeles, because of threats to public health. Every day, and particularly on rainy days, storm runoff carries industrial solvents, paints, chemicals and infection-causing bacteria into our region's rivers, lakes and streams, and out to the ocean. By using smart, nature-based projects, we could capture more runoff and filter out harmful toxins and pollutants. In the process of capturing and cleaning stormwater, projects in the Safe, Clean Water Program will add more green space, further supporting healthier communities.

Q: How would the Safe, Clean Water Program help poor and underserved communities?

Many of our region's poorer communities have fewer parks, shade and natural areas, and are much more vulnerable to extreme heat and flooding.

Neighborhoods where houses are least likely to have air conditioning often have less natural protection from the impact of extremely warm weather and face more heat-related health risks and worse air pollution.

Projects that capture more rainwater and create added green space could help cool and clean the air. You can read more here:

<https://www.thenatureofcities.com/2016/04/03/green-infrastructure-that-creates-climate-resilience-human-resilience-and-quality-of-life-in-los-angeles-underserved-neighborhoods/>

Q: Would the Safe, Clean Water Program benefit marine life?

Absolutely. Over the last ten years, thousands of dolphins, seals, sea lions and whales have washed up sick or dead along Southern California's shoreline, and one million seabirds each year choke on plastic garbage or die after getting tangled in plastic nets and other trash. And, each year, stormwater carries more than three million tons of trash from our streets -- enough to fill Dodger Stadium -- onto our local beaches. By preventing stormwater runoff from carrying tons of trash and toxins out to sea, we can better protect marine life.

Q: Can we count on the federal government to protect our beaches and water resources?

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Federal Clean Water Act have historically been key in establishing strong water quality standards; however, they provide minimal funding. Today, it's more important than ever for our County leadership to take action to improve local water resources for LA County residents.

Q: Would the Safe, Clean Water Program help our cities comply with the current federal Clean Water Act?

Yes. Los Angeles County, local municipalities and local water agencies have developed high-priority projects to capture and clean stormwater to comply with

the Clean Water Act. Unfortunately, many of these projects lack funding. The Safe, Clean Water Program would help our area meet standards for Clean Water.

Q: What funding exists for these important projects?

While some types of water supply projects are supported by reliable revenue, like regular rates, there is no dedicated funding source for stormwater projects. LA County and the Los Angeles County Flood Control District are working to identify funding and opportunities to share costs with other agencies. Several cities in the County are investing limited funds in stormwater capture and re-use plans, and the LA County Safe, Clean Water Program will help unify these efforts and maximize resources to support safe, clean local water resources for all LA County residents.

Q: What will happen next?

The Safe, Clean Water Program is currently being developed under LA County leadership and through the collaborative efforts of local city government leaders, environmentalists, business, labor, and other key stakeholders. A first draft of the Program is expected in the spring of 2018, and will continue to be developed with stakeholder input through summer of 2018.

A potential funding measure to implement the plan is also under consideration. Once finalized, it will appear as a ballot measure to be voted on by LA County residents.

Q: How much would a ballot measure raise, and who would pay for it?

The LA County Department of Public Works is analyzing the costs and potential appropriate funding mechanisms to support critical rainwater capture and water quality projects.

Q: Where can I learn more?

Visit SafeCleanWaterLA.org for more information.

Q: How can I get involved?

Email info@SafeCleanWaterLA.org to get involved.