



The Tulare Lake Basin Disadvantaged Community Water Study

In 2008, the Legislature directed the California Department of Water Resources to grant \$2 million to the County of Tulare to develop a plan for regional water and wastewater solutions for disadvantaged communities in the Tulare Lake Basin, including areas in Fresno, Kern, Kings and Tulare Counties. The resulting *Tulare Lake Basin Disadvantaged Community Water Study* was completed in August 2014. Informed by an extensive stakeholder participation process the Study developed an integrated water quality and wastewater treatment program plan to address the priority issues identified in the Basin including specific recommendations for achieving sustainable community water solutions.

DAC Database: The TLB Study developed a database of all Disadvantaged Communities (DACs) in the Tulare Lake Basin. Of the 530 unincorporated communities identified, 353 (67%) are disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged.¹ The database was then reviewed to evaluate the water quality and supply source issues as well as wastewater treatment and disposal issues within the Study Area. Of the 353 DACs, only 56% had water quality data available, and of those, 45% were considered to have a water quality issue. Approximately 27% of the communities rely on a single water source leaving them especially vulnerable to drought and other water supply challenges, as well as changes in water quality. A total of 62 communities, or 18%, have an unknown water source. Of the 38 DAC communities that have their own wastewater treatment facility, 66% had discharge violations. As a critical resource for regional planning, the Study recommends that the database continue to be maintained and updated by the County of Tulare.

Stakeholder process: A Stakeholder Oversight Advisory Committee was selected from a pool of applicants and included a member of each County Board of Supervisors, and both a local drinking water board member and a resident from a disadvantaged community in each of the four counties of the Tulare Lake Basin. The Committee also included non-voting members from federal and state funding agencies, local IRWM groups, and technical assistance providers and local non-profits. This Committee and additional stakeholder participation with each pilot were central drivers throughout all stages of the Study, consulting with the project team on everything from the identification of priority issues to the development of pilot studies and recommendations.

Priority issues identified: In consultation with the Stakeholder Oversight Advisory Committee, the project team used the database to identify common problems facing DACs in the Tulare Lake Basin and subsequently narrowed these down to five priority issues:

1. Lack of funding to offset increasingly expensive operations and maintenance costs in large part to lack of economies of scale;
2. Lack of technical, managerial and financial (TMF) capacity by water and wastewater providers;
3. Poor water quality;
4. Inadequate or unaffordable funding or funding constraints to make improvements; and
5. Lack of informed, empowered, or engaged residents.

Pilot studies: Based on the priority issues, four pilot studies were selected to address the following:

1. Management and non-infrastructure solutions to reduce costs and improve efficiency;
2. Technical solutions to improve efficiency and reduce operation and maintenance;
3. New source development; and
4. Individual household solutions.

¹ A disadvantaged community (DAC) is a community whose median household income is 80 percent or less of the statewide median household income (\$48,706 or less). A severely disadvantaged community (SDACs) is a community whose median household income is 60 percent or less of the statewide median household income (\$36,530 or less).

In consultation with the individual Project Stakeholder Advisory Groups, each project team considered solution alternatives, funding opportunities, barriers or obstacles to implementation of the proposed solutions, ways to eliminate those barriers and key steps to ensure the long-term sustainability of the implemented solutions.

Recommendations: Ultimately the Study proposes 59 specific recommendations for planning, infrastructure and other management actions at various levels to:

- Improve local technical, managerial and financial capacity;
- Improve operation and maintenance funding;
- Improve water supply quality and reliability;
- improve funding for disadvantaged communities;
- improve disadvantaged community awareness and participation;
- Improve land use planning to minimize creation of new water/wastewater issues; and
- Develop and maintain information on DAC water/wastewater needs.

Study successes:

- The TLB DAC study was compiled and made publically available (<http://tularelakebasin.com/alliance/index.cfm/final-report/>).
- A database of DACs within the Tulare Lake Basin and their water and wastewater challenges was compiled (<http://tularelakebasin.com/alliance/index.cfm/water-system-search/>).
- Interest and awareness of water and wastewater issues in the Tulare Lake Basin was expanded through outreach to more than 1100 local DAC water stakeholders from communities and water boards in all four counties.
- A roadmap or set of decision tress was developed to guide communities and funding agencies through the critical steps to selecting an appropriate alternative (<http://tularelakebasin.com/alliance/index.cfm/pilot-projects/>).
- Recommendations for local service providers, regulatory and funding agencies, as well as the legislature were developed to overcome obstacles and barriers (<http://tularelakebasin.com/alliance/index.cfm/final-report/final-report-appendix-n-recommendations-pdf/>).

Next steps: The Tulare Lake Basin Study is an important first step in developing sustainable community-driven solutions for the region. However, much more work is needed at the state, regional and local levels to follow through on the recommendations presented in the Study.

In particular, the Stakeholder Oversight Advisory Committee identified six priorities for implementation:

- 1) Continue to convene the DAC focused stakeholder group to track implementation and progress;
- 2) Establish local DAC coordinator(s) for the Tulare Lake Basin to support outreach, data coordination, funding assistance, and the integration of DACs into planning and funding processes;
- 3) Invest in DAC outreach and engagement;
- 4) Actively fund, facilitate and incentivize collaborative solutions;
- 5) Actively pursue a policy of “non-proliferation” by providing strong incentives and controls though land use planning and permitting decisions; and
- 6) Incentivize and reduce barriers to innovative approaches that reduce O&M costs.

Of the 59 recommendations included in the Study, the following consider potential actions by the legislature:

- Support the evaluation and development of a regional entity or entities to provide regional operations, management, or other services for DACs;
- Consider establishing a transitional funding program to assist with O&M costs on a temporary basis;
- Require and actively support investment in bringing existing systems into compliance and developing long-term sustainable/affordable solutions before allowing growth. In areas where there is no existing water system infrastructure available, building permits should only be issued if adequate supply and quality is confirmed;
- Require disclosure to the buyer of water quality on sale of property. Any contaminants exceeding primary drinking water quality standards should be disclosed upon sale of a property.