OPINION

California's unfulfilled promise on access to safe water

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In 2012, former Gov. Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 685, making California the first state in the nation to legally recognize the human right to water. With climate change worsening an already inequitable water system, it's important that Gov. Gavin Newsom support legislation to ensure California realizes the promise of clean water for all.

While most Californians believe strongly that all Californians should have safe drinking water, most Californians don't understand the breadth of contaminants that impact communities throughout the state, and how significant those impacts are.

Mobile home park residents in Riverside County turn on the tap to water containing unsafe levels of arsenic and bacteria. Cancer-causing solvents pollute water in Riverside and San Bernardino counties, where water districts can't afford to treat and distribute safe water, and contaminants in Sativa and other small systems in the Los Angeles basin turn tap water yellow. Hundreds of thousands of families dependent on failing water systems and private wells have been left stranded without safe water for decades. Across the state, more than 1 million Californians live in neighborhoods where pesticides, fertilizers, manure and naturally occurring toxins such as arsenic make their water unsafe to drink.

Drought and over-pumping are making safe water more scarce. The vast scale of the problem means it can only be fixed with a comprehensive, sustainable and statewide funding source. Last year, despite broad support among drinking water champions, legislation that would have created the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund was held in the Assembly without receiving a vote. It would have been funded through small fees on water customers and fees on fertilizer manufacturers

and dairies. This means this urgent crisis is still unaddressed. We need sustained support from the new administration, leadership from the Legislature and acknowledgment that unsafe drinking water is a statewide issue and a statewide disgrace.

Our California Environmental Justice Alliance EJ Scorecard identifies environmental justice and clean water champions, and last year we found them in Sen. Bill Monning, the longtime leader on this effort; Senate President Pro Tem Toni Atkins; and senators Holly Mitchell, Bob Hertzberg and Connie Leyva. Two new members of the Senate, Melissa Hurtado and Anna Caballero, represent residents affected by some of the most contaminated water in the state and we look forward to their voices in the upper house. In the Assembly, we will continue to count on environmental justice champions such as Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon and Assemblymember Wendy Carrillo to help lead this effort. We will also look to Assemblymembers Joaquin Arambula and Susan Eggman, committed drinking water advocates, to bring along Rudy Salas and other San Joaquin Valley representatives, whose constituents are among the hardest hit by unsafe drinking water.

We must come together as a state — coastal and inland regions, north and south, urban and rural communities — to ensure that all Californians, regardless of race, income or place, have safe drinking water.

We call on newly elected members in the legislature and the governor's office to join this effort to end the shameful phenomenon of unsafe drinking water in California. Gov. Gavin Newsom and legislators must gain a deeper knowledge of conditions in our communities and partner with organizations led by the people most impacted.

Together we can take prompt and effective action for safe drinking water and the health of all Californians.

Phoebe Seaton is a co-founder and co-executive director of Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability, a member of the California Environmental Justice Alliance that publishes an environmental justice scorecard at www.caleja.org/scorecard2018.