



April 27, 2022

Clerk to the Board  
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Delivered by e-mail to:

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Subject: Comment Letter - Hexavalent Chromium Preliminary Staff Report

Dear Chair Esquivel and Members of the Board:

I am writing on behalf of the California Association of Mutual Water Companies. CalMutuals is an advocacy and professional association representing about 400 member mutual water companies in California. We appreciate the efforts of the State Water Resources Control Board's (State Board) Division of Drinking Water (DDW) to meet the requirements of Health and Safety Code (HSC) Section 116365(a) by establishing a Hexavalent Chromium (Cr6) Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) as close to the Public Health Goal (PHG) as technologically feasible. We applaud DDW for proposing a compliance period and have recommendations for how to build on past lessons so that no one is left behind in meeting the new MCL for Cr6.

However, we feel that the preliminary staff report lacks adherence to some fundamental scientific, legal and administrative procedures in the process of establishing a new MCL that may create uncertainty and leave the adopted MCL vulnerable to lawsuits. Those issues will create situations where water systems with levels of Cr6 above the MCL will be required to proceed under an economically infeasible treatment directive. Those situations create a bad precedent for other future MCLs.

We offer the following comments regarding the preliminary staff report released on March 21, 2022.

- 1. Scientific integrity:** We are concerned that the proposed MCL for Cr6 is apparently based upon an outdated public health goal set by the Office of Environment and Health Hazards Assessment (OEHHA) that was established for the prior MCL adopted in 2012 and invalidated in 2017. Health and Welfare Canada and other world health authorities have considered more recent health risk assessments in establishing standards for Cr6. We recommend that the Division of Drinking Water renew its request to OEHHA to consider the latest science for the development of a new PHG.
- 2. Court mandated economic feasibility assessment:** In 2017, the California Superior Court invalidated the previous MCL for Cr6 principally because the California Department of Public Health, which was the applicable regulatory agency at that time, did not conduct a legally acceptable economic feasibility assessment. Since 2020, the DDW has made an earnest effort to explain why an economic feasibility assessment *will not* be conducted for the

proposed Cr6 MCL. In its place, DDW has explained several ways to assess potential costs for various sizes of water systems without conducting the court-mandated assessment. The first suggestion that appeared in a 2020 White Paper proposed to estimate the cost of treatment by factoring all of the impacted entities divided by the estimated cost. The Draft staff report now proposes to assess the cost as a percentage of income and note those who surpass U.S. Federal EPA guidelines for affordable water rates. The Draft staff report also proposes to assess the cost for smaller water systems based upon the use of point of use/entry devices. While this is problematic for reasons to be discussed later in this letter, the bottom line is that these approaches seem to defy the California Superior Court's specific order in interpreting pertinent statutes to conduct an economic feasibility analysis.

Failure to conduct an economic feasibility analysis increases the probability that the new MCL to be approved by the State Water Board will again be invalidated by the courts. This may result in stranded costs to be incurred by the State of California and individual water systems that exceed the proposed MCL.

We highly recommend that the State Water Board specifically direct staff to conduct an economic feasibility analysis of the proposed Cr6 MCL to be submitted to the State Department of Finance as required by law and as ordered by the courts.

- 3. Planned Universal Compliance:** Again, we applaud staff for proposing a compliance period with larger water systems going first, providing time for economies of scale to benefit smaller water systems near the end of the compliance period.

We suggest that the State Water Board increase the timeline of compliance from 2 years to 4 years for large systems, from 3 years to 5 years for medium systems, and from 4 years to 6 years for small systems. This will allow greater time for economies of scale and adaptive advances in technology led by the larger water systems, to benefit the smaller water systems.

Concurrently with the compliance periods, we urge the State Water Board to direct staff to formulate a strategic plan for compliance. Such a plan must include a financial plan that dedicates state resources to help small water systems and those serving disadvantaged communities that otherwise cannot afford compliance with the new Cr6 MCL. We feel that such a financial plan if well executed will help DDW defend the MCL in court if it should be challenged. This is because such a plan and execution would "bake-in" economic feasibility into the regulation establishing the MCL. We are currently supporting AB2041 by Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia to ensure that legal provisions established in SB200 enacted in 2019, apply to water systems that can not afford to comply with the new MCL.

Economic feasibility considers the aggregated cost of compliance, and the financial means and access to meet those costs. Regardless of the cost, a MCL can be deemed economically infeasible if small water systems and disadvantaged communities do not have the means and/or opportunities of gathering the resources in a reasonable amount of time to buy and operate the equipment required to comply, regardless of its cost. While this recommendation may require re-prioritizing the SAFER and other state funding programs, the alternative is "a race to the bottom" of non-compliance by water systems that do not have the means to comply with a new Cr6 MCL. In fact, if the 10ppb MCL adopted in 2012 had not been

invalidated, the number of water systems failing to comply with the Safe Drinking Water Act would total over 500 water systems, double the number in OEHHA's current human right to water database.

The State Water Board notes that it has funding programs available to alleviate financial strain experienced by small public water systems and their customers. CalMutuals is concerned that financial support available is offered through grant funds which are already committed to other projects, subject to state income taxes for mutual water companies, and generally challenging to access by individual small systems.

- 4. We are concerned about the ability of currently available analytical methods to meet the proposed hexavalent chromium detection limit for purposes of reporting (DLR), which is 0.05 ppb. The proposed DLR is 20 times lower than the DLR that was in place until 2017.**

We suggest that the State Board increase the proposed DLR to 0.001 mg/L instead of the proposed 0.00005 mg/L. In addition, the State Board must allow sufficient time for laboratories to acquire the necessary equipment and certification to be able to meet the proposed DLR. Sampling for PFAS became a significant issue for small water systems given the lack of local laboratory capacity and the limitation of the number of laboratories across the state due to recent mergers.

- 5. The affordability analysis methodology is inconsistent between large and small systems.** The current affordability analysis heavily relies on point-of-use devices to meet the MCL at a reasonable cost, particularly for small and rural systems. Health and Safety Code [Section 116380](#) specifies the conditions in which point-of-use (POU) and/or point-of-entry (POE) devices may be used in lieu of centralized treatment. If POU or POE is used for analyzing affordability of the proposed MCL, these should be an alternative BAT, approved by the Board as specified in Health and Safety Code §116380 and with guidance to systems that may choose this path to compliance. Otherwise, the question of treatment cost should be analyzed on the basis of an actual compliance method, not one that is merely theoretical.
- 6. POU/POE Devices.** Reliance on POU/POE as an approved treatment technology can be challenging for some communities where this approach might not work if liability for the operation of such systems has not been addressed.

We thank you for considering our comments and we welcome the opportunity to discuss further.

Sincerely,



Adán Ortega  
Executive Director