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CALIFORNIA WATER UTILITIES JUST MAKE THE GRADE

Groups critique annual consumer confidence reports: valuable health and environmental tool

(San Francisco, CA) Today, Clean Water Action (CWA), Clean Water Fund (CWF) & the California Public Interest Research Group Charitable Trust (CALPIRG), released a report which finds that most California water utilities are meeting new federal requirements for their Drinking Water Right-to-Know Reports (also known as Consumer Confidence Reports); however there is plenty of room for improvement. While many of the state's large water utilities do a better than average job of informing consumers about drinking water safety and quality, California's smaller water systems are much more likely to fail in their duty to appropriately inform consumers about these issues. The report, *Measuring Up II: An evaluation of water quality information provided to consumers in California* grades Consumer Confidence Reports (CCRs) from 249 water utilities that collectively serve nearly 25 million people in California.

"CCRs are a valuable tool to promote safe and affordable drinking water and to protect our drinking water sources," said Marguerite Young, California Director of Clean Water Action & Clean Water Fund and lead author of *Measuring Up II*. She continues, "we are very concerned that the water systems in the state most likely to have water quality and safety concerns are also doing a poor job of educating and engaging their water consumers in efforts to improve public health."

The authors of *Measuring Up II*, a sequel to last year's *Measuring Up* Report, graded CCRs from utilities selected for evaluation based on size and geography. All water systems serving more than 40,000 customers are included as well as 50 smaller utilities. The authors developed a grading system based on how well the utilities met specific federal Safe Drinking Water Act requirements. The major findings of the report and suggestions for improvement follow:

- Of the 241 utilities that responded to the request for reports, the average score was 72 points with 77% (182) of the utilities receiving a "C" or better. The report noted a big disparity in performance related to system size. Forty three percent of small utilities (5,000-10,000 customers) and 60% of extra small systems (<5,000 customers) missed enough points to receive a grade of 'F' or failed to include a required critical element in the report thus automatically scoring a 0. Conversely, more than 60% of large systems serving more than 50,000 customers received an 'A' or 'B'. **The State should provide resources to help improve the CCRs from California's smaller water systems to ensure more equitable dissemination of critical drinking water information to all Californians.**

- Many utilities, both large and small, fell short in the area of providing adequate translations of the CCRs into languages, other than English, that are commonly spoken in their service areas. Only 26 water systems made full Spanish translations available. Authors deducted points from 46 utilities with sizeable Spanish speaking populations for failing to provide a Spanish advisory with their reports and only two utilities provided full translations in languages in addition to Spanish. **Utilities should make a better effort to provide translations for non-English speakers in the communities they serve.**
- When a contaminant was detected in a water system, there was universally inadequate information in the CCRs about the sources of contaminants. While utilities are required to disclose information about contaminant sources, many claimed not to know specific sources. **Utilities should make a better effort to determine sources of contaminants and communicate detailed information about known sources.**
- There was little effort to engage the public in source water assessment and protection efforts and few general requests for public participation via the CCR. Only 20 utilities (8%) extended customers an invitation to participate in the source water assessment process or source water protection efforts, and only 27 utilities (10.7%) made a specific request for public input. **Utilities should make a concerted effort to engage the public in protecting the sources of their drinking water.**

“It is critical to the health and safety of Californians that CCRs receive high grades,” said Matt Shaffer, Toxics Policy Advocate for CALPIRG. “A strong report card indicates that water utilities are diligent about meeting federal and state requirements and disclosing accurate water quality and health effects information, which leads to better community involvement and ultimately cleaner water.”

New in this year’s report is a section on the prevalence and health effects of eight contaminants found in California drinking water, including a review of water utility performance in communicating this information. These contaminants include lead, hexavalent chromium, perchlorate, arsenic, MTBE, pesticides, nitrates and disinfection by-products (including trihalomethanes). “Our examination of drinking water contaminants indicates that consumers should be vigilant participants in protecting their drinking water quality,” said Matt Shaffer.

Many utility officials who were surveyed for the report agree with the authors that CCRs are only useful if they are read and understood. “Our goal has been to provide utilities and consumers with a roadmap toward making CCRs understandable and useful,” Young said. “If CCRs are developed and distributed properly, they will provide vital information so that people can make intelligent decisions about the health and safety of their families.”

The full *Measuring Up II* report can be downloaded on April 30th at www.cleanwateraction.org/us/ca or email ctraub@cleanwater.org to have the report emailed to you.

CWF is a national §501(c)(3) research and education organization, founded in 1976, which promotes the public interest in protection of natural resources, with a special emphasis on water issues. CWF's programs build on and complement those of CWA, a 700,000 member national §501(c)(4) organization.

CALPIRG Charitable Trust is the 501(c)(3) sister organization of the California Public Interest Research Group, a non-profit, non-partisan research and advocacy organization working on behalf of consumers and the environment. CALPIRG has over 70,000 members statewide.

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