

# How to Secure Federal Funding Now for Water Safety Projects

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REPRINTS



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Between budget cuts, the recent shutdown and a slew of policy changes, local leaders are understandably concerned about the federal government's continued commitment to helping communities reach critical water safety standards. Despite changing standards with regards to PFAS, support for clean water remains as strong (and bipartisan) as ever.

The key to accessing funding, including for water-related infrastructure, will be for leaders to reframe their projects in a way that matches new funding priorities.

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Communities across the country are feeling the pressure as they struggle to comply with federal regulations regarding PFAS — the so-called “forever chemicals” that don't break down easily and have come to contaminate many communities' water supply. Communities will soon have to comply with new federal regulations, and it's not a cheap task. Nearly a [quarter of large water utilities](#) in the U.S. exceed the new federal PFAS limits, and the cost for even small communities to integrate the necessary filtration systems can be well over \$60 million.



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Despite a grace period the Trump administration has granted communities, local leaders are increasingly concerned that the federal government is turning water safety into a costly, unfunded mandate. For projects at this scale, every second matters, and the deadline to meet water safety standards is ticking. Designing, permitting and building improved infrastructure can take years, and the funding cycles for these projects are slow.

Without clear guidance, community leaders have been left to ask whether they can still count on the federal government for financial support.

The answer is yes. Despite the headlines and the noise, the money and support for these projects haven't suddenly vanished. The truth is that all elected officials — regardless of political affiliation — want clean water access for American families. [Eighty-one percent](#) of Americans cite it as a top concern, and [75 percent of Americans](#) support the federal government's PFAS regulations. The commitment to clean water hasn't changed.

What has changed, however, is how communities should expect federal agencies to go about funding these projects. Every administration brings with it its own set of policy priorities and goals, and while these changes may seem significant, the money hasn't disappeared — it's just shifted.

As recently as October, the federal government was accepting [grant proposals](#) for infrastructure improvements to midsize and large drinking water systems. And loan programs like state revolving funds and the federal government's Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (WIFIA) are still lending. The city of Lake Oswego, Ore., recently received a \$125 million loan through WIFIA.

The same types of projects are still receiving funding. The difference comes in the language that's being used to describe them. Compare how [the Trump administration announced Lake Oswego's project](#) to a similar announcement from the Biden administration about a project in [Chicago](#). In contrast, the Chicago loan announcement highlights the project's impact on high-risk communities, while Lake Oswego highlights the transformation of technology and modernization.

It's a difference in policy priority between the administrations, and it should be a road map for communities that need to update their project proposals. Under the Biden administration, projects that addressed things like “equity” or “environmental justice” were more likely to get funding. Under the Trump administration, those are the projects that have been first on the chopping block.

The fundamental project may be the same, but to get the funding they need, communities need to be able to highlight how their project will impact the Trump administration's priorities. These include having data for things like “job creation,” “safety” or “domestic manufacturing.”

It's a small change — a different frame on the same project — but it's something city managers and public works directors need to be cognizant of as they seek federal funding for these types of water projects. Winning grant dollars is a matter of being able to show how water filtration helps achieve these policy priorities: How many jobs will a project create, and what kind of security does it add to a community?

These may seem like minor changes, but they often make the difference for grant applications — and it's why it's so essential for communities to engage federal water employees early on in the project planning process. If engaged before funding solicitations are released, program officers at federal agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency can provide feedback on [grant proposals](#), offering [suggestions](#) and improvements before the grant window opens.

For similar reasons, community officials need to be engaging their senators and representatives early on to ensure that their offices have input and buy-in for a project. Proposals that have the backing of federal elected officials are generally more successful than those that don't. Not only can congressional leaders help support competitive grants for the project, but they can also provide funding through congressionally directed spending in the annual appropriations bills.

Achieving PFAS compliance is a heavy lift, but the funding architecture for communities is still intact — and growing. Communities that combine solid data, early agency engagement and aligned messaging can win the dollars they need.

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