



August 2, 2024

Via email to:

Raul Torrez, Attorney General
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201 3rd Street NW, Suite 900
Albuquerque, New Mexico 87102
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Joseph M. Maestas, State Auditor
Office of the State Auditor
2540 Camino Edward Ortiz, Suite A
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87507
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Re: Community Request to Investigate the Camino Real Regional Utility Authority Pursuant to Environmental Protection, Financial and Consumer Protection Laws, and the New Mexico Open Meetings Act

Dear Attorney General Torrez and State Auditor Maestas,

The New Mexico Environmental Law Center (“NMELC”), on behalf of Santa Teresa and Sunland Park Community Members (hereinafter, “Community”), hereby submits the following request for the New Mexico Department of Justice (“DOJ”) and the New Mexico Office of the State Auditor (“State Auditor”) to investigate the Camino Real Regional Utility Authority (“CRRUA”) for any and all violations of environmental protection laws because CRRUA continues to provide public water that does not comply with federal health standards; consistently fails to meet these laws’ public notice requirements for contaminations and violations; and continues to ignore the New Mexico Environment Department’s (“NMED”) attempts at enforcement. Community further requests DOJ and the State Auditor investigate CRRUA for any and all violations of consumer protection laws and waste, fraud, or abuse of state and federal funds, as initially raised by NMED’s request for an investigation by DOJ and

the State Auditor on March 14, 2024,¹ because CRRUA continues to shift the financial burden of providing consistently safe and clean public water to consumers – despite the availability of adequate government funds to address the ongoing water quality issues, which CRRUA has already received some funding for but has failed to use properly.² Community further requests DOJ and the State Auditor investigate CRRUA for any and all violations and abuses of the New Mexico Open Meetings Act, NMSA 1978 §§ 10-15-1 to 10-15-4, because of CRRUA’s ongoing pattern and practice of canceling and rescheduling public meetings, without reasonable public notice, to seemingly limit public attendance and participation.

Community acknowledges that NMED and CRRUA entered into an agreement on April 29, 2024, for a third-party firm, the Eastern Research Group (“ERG”), to perform an “audit” of all aspects of CRRUA operations, including financial, administrative, and technical, “to identify shortcomings and provide a set of recommendations to ensure the delivery of safe drinking water.”³ ERG, however, has since clarified that the evaluation was “not an audit,” but instead a two and a half day process during which ERG inspected CRRUA’s four arsenic treatment facilities and interviewed CRRUA staff in order to identify and create a prioritized list of factors that CRRUA could improve on.⁴ The third-party evaluation, thus, was neither a comprehensive audit of CRRUA’s operations, facilities, practices, and procedures, nor an evaluation that is likely

¹ See Attachment 1 [NMED Letter to New Mexico Department of Justice and Office of the State Auditor and Administrative Order].

² Notably, at a public town hall in Las Cruces, New Mexico, on July 25, 2024, Governor Michelle Lujan-Grisham stated publicly that “money has gone to clean up the water but that never happened.” The Governor later publicly alluded that there were “folks locally who maybe got into a bad contract or situation or made a mistake” – raising further Community concerns surrounding CRRUA’s waste, fraud, and abuse of government funds.

³ See *New Mexico Environment Department Launches Third-Party Audit of CRRUA Operations*, New Mexico Environment Department (May 6, 2024), <https://www.env.nm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2024-05-06-NMED-launches-third-party-audit-of-CRRUA-operations-final.pdf>.

⁴ Luisa Barrios, *Third-Party Performs Evaluation on CRRUA*, KTSM El Paso (May 30, 2024), <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/third-party-performs-evaluation-on-crrua/ar-BB1nmLWU?ocid=BingNewsSearch> (emphasis added).

to result in any meaningful change to CRRUA operations that are necessary to ensure residents are provided consistently safe and clean drinking water. ERG has publicly stated that, based on their evaluation, CRRUA is doing “a great job”⁵ – contrary to the most recently available public information indicating that CRRUA continues to violate federal health standards.⁶ ERG’s evaluation of CRRUA is neither comprehensive nor adequate to ascertain whether CRRUA is in compliance with applicable environmental protection, financial and consumer protection laws and ultimately, whether the water CRRUA continues to provide residents of New Mexico’s southwest border region is safe for consumption and use. Community thus emphasizes that this third-party evaluation does not negate the need for DOJ and the State Auditor to conduct an official investigation into CRRUA’s operations and violations of environmental protection laws, consumer protection laws, the New Mexico Open Meetings Act, and CRRUA’s waste, fraud, and abuse of state and federal funds, but instead emphasizes an even greater need for DOJ and the

⁵ See *id.*; see also *Third-Party Evaluation Site Visit of CRRUA Completed*, Camino Real Regional Utility Authority Customer Message (May 30, 2024), <https://crrua.org/sites/default/files/Third-Party%20Evaluation%20Site%20Visit%20of%20CRRUA%20Completed.pdf>.

⁶ See David Ibañez, *CRRUA Finds Elevated Arsenic Levels at a Santa Teresa Water Treatment Plant*, CBS 4 News (June 28th, 2024), <https://cbs4local.com/newsletter-daily/crrua-finds-elevated-arsenic-levels-at-a-santa-teresa-water-treatment-plant-santa-teresa-sunland-park-new-mexico-nm-camino-real-regional-authority-billion-juan-crosby-environment-department> (reporting that on June 11, 2024, CRRUA water supplies tested 13 parts per billion and on June 12, 2024, CRRUA water supplies tested 12 ppb, both above the federal maximum contaminant level for arsenic); see also CRRUA Customer Message (June 28, 2024), https://crrua.org/sites/default/files/Arsenic_Final%20Issued%206-28-24_0.pdf (CRRUA confirming arsenic contamination and SDWA violation, which notably was the first time since the violation occurred two weeks prior that CRRUA provided notice to the public) (emphasis added); see also Dave Burge, *CRRUA Says Water Safe, Despite Recent Letter of Violation*, KTSM El Paso (May 26, 2024), <https://www.yahoo.com/news/crrua-says-water-safe-despite-214645101.html> (“CRRUA said that in recent testing done on May 7, three of their four treatment plants were below the federal limit of 10 parts per billion”). Notably, CRRUA continues to not test the Border Entry Arsenic Treatment Facility, asserting its exclusion from testing is “because it consistently meets all NMED requirements,” without providing the public with further evidence of it doing so, and despite the fact that the Border Entry Arsenic Treatment Facility has exceeded arsenic maximum contaminant levels in the recent past, including during the water crisis in the late winter of 2023. See Drew Pittock, *CRRUA Passes July’s Round of NMED-Mandated Arsenic Testing*, KFOX 14 (July 15, 2024), <https://kfoxtv.com/news/local/crrua-camino-real-regional-utility-authority-santa-teresa-sunland-park-new-mexico-water-new-mexico-environment-department-eurofins-environment-testing>.

State Auditor to launch a comprehensive investigation into CRRUA's operations, policies, and practices to determine its compliance with applicable law. ERG's findings are merely informative and, while ERG has included recommendations, no assurances or enforcement mechanisms exist to ensure CRRUA's consistent compliance with the applicable environmental, consumer protection, and public meetings laws, nor does anything ERG has done address the ongoing water contamination issues impacting CRRUA water users and Community. It is thus necessary that DOJ and the State Auditor conduct an investigation into CRRUA's operations and take any and all enforcement actions necessary to bring CRRUA into compliance with applicable law.

I. Factual Background

The Santa Teresa Community and the City of Sunland Park are located in the southernmost region of New Mexico, along the state's border with Texas and Mexico. CRRUA is the public utility responsible for the management and maintenance of the City of Sunland Park and Santa Teresa water and wastewater system. Formed in 2009, CRRUA's mission is "to provide quality customer service, and to provide reliable and sustainable water supply and waste collection treatment."⁷ However, since its formation, CRRUA has repeatedly failed to provide the residents of Santa Teresa and Sunland Park with clean and safe drinking water; timely inform residents of dangerous arsenic levels and other contaminants in the public water system; address and respond to community concerns and complaints surrounding their water quality; and promptly cooperate and come into compliance with NMED.

CRRUA's ongoing failure to provide borderland communities with safe and clean water has resulted in residents' water appearing slimy and discolored, accompanied by foul odors like

⁷ See *About CRRUA*, CRRUA, <https://www.crrua.org/about> (last visited April 5, 2024).

sulfur. Oftentimes, residents must rely upon their own senses and community social media pages to determine whether their water is safe for consumption and use, as CRRUA releases public notices regarding the water quality, if at all, well-after these issues begin. As a result of using and consuming the water, many residents have and continue to experience adverse health effects, including, but not limited to, skin rashes, nausea, and vomiting.

Residents have thus been relying on their own resources to provide their households with safe water for drinking, bathing, cooking, laundry, and other household uses. Specifically, residents, using their own monies, have been purchasing water bottles and five-gallon water jugs from gas stations and other local convenience stores. Residents with disabilities, who cannot drive into El Paso, Texas, the closest neighboring city, to purchase safe water, must rely on neighbors to provide them with water bottles and jugs, when possible. All the while, residents are required to pay increased water utility bills to CRRUA for water that is unfit for consumption and use. Most recently, CRRUA announced a residential water and wastewater rate increase, set to begin in July 2024, with an additional residential rate increase in January 2025. CRRUA has explicitly stated that these rate increases are necessary “to help ensure the health, safety, and welfare of customers,” listing one of the major “benefits of higher rates” as “[k]eeping arsenic levels in water within the federal limit of 10 parts per billion (ppb)”⁸ – wrongfully placing the financial burden on community members to ensure CRRUA complies with federal and state law and provides residents with safe and clean drinking water.

⁸ Drew Pittock, *CRRUA to Increase Water Rates After Five Years Citing Rising Operational Costs*, KFOX14 (May 14, 2024), <https://kfoxtv.com/news/local/crrua-to-increase-water-rates-after-five-years-citing-rising-operational-costs-camino-real-regional-utility-authority-sunland-park-santa-teresa-new-mexico-environment-department-juan-carlos-crosby>.

To date, residents of the Santa Teresa Community and the City of Sunland Park continue to experience slimy, discolored water, accompanied by foul odors,⁹ while CRRUA continues to release public statements asserting that the water is safe for consumption and use.¹⁰ While NMED has continued to engage in negotiations and administrative processes to bring CRRUA into compliance,¹¹ CRRUA seemingly remains in noncompliance – raising concerns surrounding violations of environmental protection, financial and consumer protection laws. Accordingly, Community requests that DOJ and State Auditor formally investigate CRRUA and ultimately, bring CRRUA into compliance with all applicable law so as to ensure these communities receive consistently clean and safe public water.

II. DOJ Should Investigate CRRUA for Environmental Protection Law Violations Under the Federal Safe Drinking Water Act, the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Act, and the New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations.

CRRUA’s ongoing failure to provide safe and clean drinking water presents environmental protection law violations, specifically under the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974 (“SDWA”),¹² the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Act,¹³ and New Mexico’s Drinking Water Regulations.¹⁴ Because DOJ’s Environmental Protection Division specializes in enforcing environmental protection laws on behalf of residents’ health and their environment,¹⁵

⁹ See Attachment 2 [Images of CRRUA Public Water Quality].

¹⁰ For a list of publicly available notices provided by CRRUA: *see Notices*, CRRUA, <https://www.crrua.org/resources> (last visited April 17, 2024); *see also* Attachment 3 [CRRUA Water Safe to Drink Notices].

¹¹ See Attachment 1 (“The Department has issued CRRUA an Administrative Compliance Order and will proceed in the administrative process to achieve compliance with Safe Drinking Water Act standards from CRRUA. NMED has been in and out of negotiations with CRRUA over several years to address various compliance issues, including CRRUA’s treatment of arsenic from the public’s drinking water”).

¹² 42 U.S.C. §300f *et seq.* (1974).

¹³ NMSA 1978 §§ 74-1-1 to -15.

¹⁴ 20.7.10 NMAC.

¹⁵ See *Affirmative Litigation*, New Mexico Department of Justice, <https://nm DOJ.gov/about-the-office/affirmative-litigation/#environmental-protection> (last visited June 21, 2024).

Community requests DOJ formally investigate CRRUA for the following environmental protection violations:

A. CRRUA has and continues to violate the federal Safe Drinking Water Act by failing to consistently supply public water that meets federal health standards and by failing to provide timely public notice of contaminations and violations.

The Safe Drinking Water Act was established to protect the quality of public drinking water nationwide.¹⁶ The SDWA authorizes the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (“EPA”) to establish national health-related standards that set the maximum contaminant levels “requisite to protect the public welfare.”¹⁷ The SDWA consequently requires operators of public water systems to comply with EPA’s drinking water standards.¹⁸ For purposes and applicability of the SDWA, operators of public water systems are those that provide public water for human consumption through pipes or other constructed conveyances, so long as such a system has at least fifteen service connections or regularly serves at least twenty-five individuals.¹⁹

EPA has established a list of contaminants, as well as requisite levels and standards, for public drinking water.²⁰ EPA divides contaminants into two categories: Primary Drinking Water Contaminants and Secondary Drinking Water Contaminants.²¹ Primary Drinking Water Contaminants are subject to federal regulation and enforcement due to their adverse effects on

¹⁶ See 42 U.S.C. §300f *et seq.*; see also *Summary of the Safe Drinking Water Act*, U.S. EPA, [https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/summary-safe-drinking-water-act#:~:text=The%20Safe%20Drinking%20Water%20Act%20\(SDWA\)%20was%20established%20to%20protect,above%20ground%20or%20underground%20sources](https://www.epa.gov/laws-regulations/summary-safe-drinking-water-act#:~:text=The%20Safe%20Drinking%20Water%20Act%20(SDWA)%20was%20established%20to%20protect,above%20ground%20or%20underground%20sources) (last updated on Sept. 6, 2023).

¹⁷ See 42 U.S.C. § 300f; *id.* § 300g–1.

¹⁸ *Id.* § 300g (applying the SDWA’s “national primary drinking water regulations ... to each public water system in each State”).

¹⁹ *Id.* § 300f(4)(A).

²⁰ For a full list of contaminants listed by the EPA: see *Drinking Water Regulations and Contaminants*, U.S. EPA, <https://www.epa.gov/sdwa/drinking-water-regulations-and-contaminants#Primary> (last updated Feb. 14, 2024); see also *National Primary Drinking Water Regulations*, U.S. EPA, <https://www.epa.gov/ground-water-and-drinking-water/national-primary-drinking-water-regulations> (last updated Jan. 2, 2024).

²¹ See *Drinking Water Regulations and Contaminants*, *supra* note 20.

public health and welfare, whereas Secondary Drinking Water Contaminants and their associated regulations are non-enforceable, due to these contaminants' effects being limited to "cosmetic" or "aesthetic."²² Of concern here is the inorganic contaminant "arsenic," which EPA lists as a Primary Drinking Water Contaminant.²³ EPA lists the adverse health effects of arsenic to include: "Thickening and discoloration of the skin; stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and liver effects; [c]ardiovascular, pulmonary, immunological, neurological (e.g., numbness and partial paralysis), reproductive, and endocrine (e.g., diabetes) effects; [and] [c]ancer of the bladder, lungs, skin, kidney, nasal passages, liver, and prostate."²⁴ Under the SDWA, EPA's maximum contaminant level for arsenic in public drinking water is .010 milligrams per liter (mg/L).²⁵ Further, the SDWA and EPA's implementing regulations require operators of public water systems to provide notice, within twenty-four hours after the system learns of a SDWA violation, to all customers and others who consume the water, and repeatedly issue notice every three months as the violation continues.²⁶

CRRUA is an operator of a public water system, as defined under the SDWA, as CRRUA provides piped water to the public for human consumption, serves 19,466 residents, and has approximately 7,318 service connections.²⁷ Thus, CRRUA is required to comply with the SDWA and accordingly, EPA's implementing regulations and drinking water standards.²⁸ CRRUA, however, has consistently violated SDWA arsenic standards for over a decade²⁹ and to date, to

²² See *id.*; see also *National Primary Drinking Water Regulations*, *supra* note 20.

²³ See *id.*

²⁴ See *EPA Arsenic Consumer Fact Sheet*, U.S. EPA, <https://nepis.epa.gov/Exe/ZyPDF.cgi?Dockey=60000E1E.txt> (March 2007).

²⁵ See *National Primary Drinking Water Regulations*, *supra* note 20.

²⁶ 40 C.F.R. § 141.202.

²⁷ See Attachment 1 (data obtained from NMED database).

²⁸ 42 U.S.C. § 300g.

²⁹ See *EWG Tap Water Database: Arsenic, Camino Real Regional Utility Authority*, Environmental Working Group, <https://www.ewg.org/tapwater/system-contaminant.php?pws=NM3502507&contamcode=1005> (last visited April 29,

the best of Community’s knowledge and belief, continues to do so. From February 2012 to April 2016, water sample test results show “a consistent pattern of arsenic violations.”³⁰ In 2013, arsenic levels in CRRUA water supplies tested 80 percent above federal health standards.³¹ In 2014, CRRUA reported four separate arsenic level violations.³² These violations, throughout this four-year period, were detected in all parts of CRRUA’s public utility system – meaning none of CRRUA’s storage tanks, arsenic treatment plants, and other facilities were operating in compliance with the SDWA.³³ Further, EPA’s Dallas office confirmed that during these periods of violations, CRRUA failed to correctly sample arsenic levels three times, while at the same time assuring residents that arsenic levels in public water supplies were within SDWA standards.³⁴ From 2015 to 2016, arsenic levels in CRRUA’s water supply levels reached severely high levels, ranging from 33.0 to 38.0 parts per billion (ppb).³⁵ During an April 2016 CRRUA Board of Directors meeting, it was further revealed that CRRUA’s Sunland Park arsenic treatment plant had been inoperative for more than a year, and a plant serving Santa Teresa had been inoperative for six months.³⁶ Despite these deficiencies, CRRUA continued to service water to nearly 20,000 New Mexican residents.³⁷

Notably, CRRUA did little to investigate and report these heightened arsenic levels until a local community member reported these violations, based on their own individual water sample

2024) (showing arsenic levels in CRRUA water supplies testing consistently above the EPA’s Maximum Contaminant Level from 2014 to 2019).

³⁰ Kent Paterson, *Border Utility Finds Itself in Hot Water*, NM Politics (July 6, 2016), <https://nmpolitics.net/index/2016/07/border-utility-finds-itself-in-hot-water/>.

³¹ Kent Paterson, *Is Sunland Park the Border’s Flint, Michigan?*, NM Politics (June 6, 2016), <https://nmpolitics.net/index/2016/06/is-sunland-park-the-borders-flint-michigan/>.

³² *Id.* (emphasis added).

³³ *Border Utility Finds Itself in Hot Water*, *supra* note 30 (emphasis added).

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ See *EWG Tap Water Database*, *supra* note 29.

³⁶ *Is Sunland Park the Border’s Flint, Michigan?*, *supra* note 31.

³⁷ *Id.*; see also Attachment 1 (NMED database reporting CRRUA provides water services to 19,466 residents).

test results. In 2016, Dr. Paul Maxwell, a resident of Santa Teresa, tested two water samples drawn on April 20, 2016, from CRRUA-serviced resident water supplies in Santa Teresa and Anapra, a colonia in the region.³⁸ The results revealed arsenic levels 20 percent above federal and state health standards in Santa Teresa, and arsenic levels 40 percent higher than federal and state health standards in Anapra³⁹ – in violation of the SDWA.

The trend of CRRUA's heightened arsenic levels and failure to investigate these violations remains ongoing. To the best of Community's knowledge,⁴⁰ CRRUA water supplies maintained high arsenic levels throughout 2023, but this was intentionally ignored by CRRUA and NMED until the ongoing contamination reached its most recent significant peak in late 2023, when the public utility failed to timely notify residents of heightened arsenic levels despite receiving several consumer complaints the week prior. On November 27, 2023, residents' water texture became slimy, while also emitting foul odors and tastes.⁴¹ Residents began experiencing adverse health effects such as nausea, as well as witnessing illnesses in pets consuming the water.⁴² For the next three days, CRRUA received numerous calls and complaints from residents regarding the water quality.⁴³ CRRUA sporadically answered consumers' calls during the first few days, but then for the next week, CRRUA became unresponsive, failing to answer its phone line, nor

³⁸ *Is Sunland Park the Border's Flint, Michigan?*, *supra* note 31.

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Community notes that there is a lack of public information and test results available from the periods between 2020 and 2023, and accordingly requests DOJ and the State Auditor investigate the three-year gap in CRRUA's reports for any and all SDWA violations, including heightened arsenic contamination levels.

⁴¹ See Attachment 4 [Community Members' Experiences]; see also Kent Paterson, *Sunland Park Déjà Vu: Water, Management Crisis and Community Protest*, El Chuqueño (April 15, 2024), <https://elchuqueno.com/sunland-park-deja-vu-water-management-crisis-and-community-protest/>.

⁴² See Attachment 4; see also *Sunland Park Déjà Vu: Water, Management Crisis and Community Protest*, *supra* note 41.

⁴³ See Attachment 4; see also *Sunland Park Déjà Vu: Water, Management Crisis and Community Protest*, *supra* note 41.

making available a voicemail for residents to leave messages.⁴⁴ One week later, on December 1, 2023, CRRUA, the Doña Ana County government, and NMED issued a multi-day “Do Not Drink” order to residents, reporting high pH levels.⁴⁵ A subsequent NMED investigation revealed elevated arsenic and pH levels in the public’s drinking water, in violation of the SDWA.⁴⁶ Due to the “lack of monitoring process control and recordkeeping by CRRUA operations staff,” NMED was unable to determine the amount of caustic soda that CRRUA had injected into the public water supply, nor how long the public water supply had been contaminated without any action taken by CRRUA, because of the “failure by CRRUA operations staff to recognize” CRRUA’s failed pH sensors and treatment operations.⁴⁷ NMED did estimate, however, that the contamination may have begun as early as November 21, 2023, based on an investigative download of the CRRUA water pH controllers’ data log – which appears to be the only reliable and available data at this time in regards to when the contamination began and the extent of the contamination because of CRRUA’s failure to monitor treatment operations and instead, ignore clear indications of pH sensor failure.⁴⁸ NMED’s investigation further revealed that “CRRUA did not utilize their emergency response plan once the emergency was identified.”⁴⁹ The NMED

⁴⁴ See Attachment 4; see also *Sunland Park Déjà Vu: Water, Management Crisis and Community Protest*, supra note 41.

⁴⁵ See *Environment Department Confirms “Do Not Drink” Order Required for Camino Real Regional Utility Authority*, New Mexico Environment Department (Dec. 1, 2023), <https://www.env.nm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023-12-01-COMMS-Environment-Department-confirms-Do-Not-Drink-order-required-for-Camino-Real-Regional-Utility-Authority-Final.pdf> (emphasis added).

⁴⁶ See *NMED Investigation Report for Camino Real Regional Utility Authority*, New Mexico Environment Department (Jan. 12, 2024), https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/HKA~sl~mnAhFiTd2yWeBAialqR+PaKNAPF7ukVZ7mMg+heW4IQHd5HCwbeRZtQJ27Mt6yV5EX9uxm2bbRZTOOWZmFMjnaD1KixRLOHEsChmNQF4EEA~sl~JPjUxg==.pdf.

⁴⁷ See *id.* at 7.

⁴⁸ See *id.* (noting that during NMED’s investigation, NMED discovered the pH sensor at CRRUA’s treatment plant showed a negative pH value, which “should have indicated a treatment failure to CRRUA operations staff.” NMED’s Investigative Report further states that, “A failure of the pH sensors and a failure by CRRUA operations staff to recognize that failure led to an unknown amount of caustic soda to be injected into the water system”) (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ See *id.*

investigation also uncovered that three of CRRUA's four arsenic treatment plants had been "offline and bypassed" for more than a year.⁵⁰

In response, NMED issued several Notices of Violations ("NOVs") to CRRUA for the public utility's SDWA violations, namely exceeding arsenic maximum contaminant levels⁵¹ and for the utility's failure to notify the public and NMED of the ongoing SDWA violations.⁵² These four NOVs issued against CRRUA were in addition to three separate NOVs NMED had already issued against CRRUA in 2023 for similar violations, with the highest arsenic contaminant level in 2023 reaching 36 ppb.⁵³ To date, NMED continues to issue NOVs against CRRUA, while CRRUA continues to fail to comply with the SDWA and EPA's implementing regulations.⁵⁴

Most recently, on June 11 and June 12, 2024, CRRUA water supplies tested above federal arsenic maximum contaminant levels, at 13 ppb and 12 ppb, respectively.⁵⁵ Notably, CRRUA's Customer Message on June 28, 2024, was the first time residents were notified of the arsenic

⁵⁰ See *id.* at 6-7.

⁵¹ See Notice of Violation – Arsenic Maximum Contaminant Level at Border Tank (STBC), NMED (Dec. 11, 2023), https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/HKA~sl~mnAhFiTd2yWeBAialqR+PaKNAPF7jkQJNaFE7T0EijJSlibXbGdobxIcMR66kRDtXCatKjc4v0FdZSBLChI4tDtf9dv8L6ZBS0fX8PRsjsYwu0BMEw==.pdf; see Notice of Violation – Arsenic Maximum Contaminant Level at Industrial Park Arsenic Treatment Plant, NMED (Dec. 11, 2023), https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/HKA~sl~mnAhFiTd2yWeBAialqR+PaKNAPF7xusRiAghbZdlzmZfAyurfooT22JFQTO8OkLpUR4nmgMXRrSaCaq~sl~fK6Ybib~sl~gwNPKobTKfLeEwOqkN4ON23hEA==.pdf.

⁵² See Notice of Violation – Arsenic Maximum Contaminant Level NMED Notification, NMED (Dec. 6, 2023), https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/HKA~sl~mnAhFiTd2yWeBAialqR+PaKNAPF7juypousR1W0lUtVBadewVasYjSL81ASVGaeupTyfnCE0Uw~sl~9cK2oSLqkZv1XNDEBJhe8iaAR~sl~yYTyEzoikBDqw==.pdf; see Notice of Violation – Failure to Provide Public Notification, NMED (Dec. 12, 2023), https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/HKA~sl~mnAhFiTd2yWeBAialqR+PaKNAPF7RD64X+9EMOqOzVsfI9jAPmB45ltI41yrFkBBHOtQ96ld7YhT~sl~DEsuXYAT4NOXultlke5zFZRGoGzshWaUmdubA==.pdf.

⁵³ See Camino Real Regional Utility Authority, Consumer Confidence Report at 3 (2023), https://crrua.org/sites/default/files/CRRUA_2024_derlow_0.pdf (briefly listing arsenic contaminant levels found in CRRUA water supplies to have ranged from 4-36 ppb in 2023). For all recent and active NOVs issued by NMED against CRRUA, see *Enforcement Watch*, NMED, <https://www.env.nm.gov/enforcement-watch/> (last updated April 15, 2024) (filter for "Camino Real Regional Utility Authority").

⁵⁴ See *id.* (most recently issued NOVs concerning arsenic contamination dating April 19, 2024, for CRRUA's Industrial Park Arsenic Treatment Plant exceeding the arsenic MCL during the 2nd quarter of 2024, testing at 0.028 mg/L); see also Ibanez, *supra* note 6 (CRRUA water supplies testing above federal arsenic maximum contaminant levels on June 11 and June 12, 2024); see also CRRUA Customer Message, *supra* note 6.

⁵⁵ See Ibanez, *supra* note 6; see also CRRUA Customer Message, *supra* note 6.

contamination, despite the SDWA and EPA's implementing regulations' explicit requirements that CRRUA provide notice, within twenty-four hours after CRRUA learns of a SDWA violation, to all customers and others who consume the water.⁵⁶ Instead, CRRUA did not provide notice to customers until two weeks after CRRUA had learned of the SDWA violation.⁵⁷ Moreover, NMED has not acknowledged, nor issued a NOV, for this violation. CRRUA's late public notice further misrepresents to the public the extent of the arsenic contamination and violation, first stating, "Quick response by CRRUA returned the facility back into compliance within hours," but later acknowledging that arsenic contaminant levels were above federal health standards and in violation of the SDWA for two days.⁵⁸ Thus, as discussed above and throughout this Request, not only does CRRUA continue to violate federal maximum contaminant levels for arsenic in the public's drinking water, but also consistently fails to provide adequate public notice of arsenic contamination levels, instead misrepresenting the severity and extent of arsenic contamination to the public water supply, in violation of the SDWA.⁵⁹

CRRUA's failure to provide timely public notice of SDWA violations is both frequent and ongoing, extending beyond arsenic contamination violations to other SDWA violations as well – further necessitating DOJ's prompt and comprehensive investigation into CRRUA because CRRUA continues to commit the same violations, despite NMED deadlines for compliance with the law. For example, on May 15, 2023, NMED issued an Asbestos Monitoring & Reporting NOV to CRRUA, triggering the requirement under the SDWA and New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations that CRRUA notify customers of the violation within a year of the issued NOV.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ 40 C.F.R. § 141.202.

⁵⁷ See also CRRUA Customer Message, *supra* note 6.

⁵⁸ See *id.* (emphasis added).

⁵⁹ See 40 C.F.R. § 141.202(a)(9) (emphasis added).

⁶⁰ See 40 C.F.R. § 141.204; see 20.7.10.100 NMAC (incorporating 40 C.F.R. § 141.204); see Notice of Violation - Failure to Provide Public Notice, New Mexico Environment Department (June 16, 2024),

CRRUA, however, yet again failed to notify the public in a timely manner, prompting NMED to issue a NOV for Failure to Provide Public Notice to CRRUA on June 16, 2024, emphasizing CRRUA's ongoing disregard for the SDWA's public notice provisions, which were created and intended to keep the public informed and to protect public health and welfare.⁶¹ CRRUA had one year to comply with this specific NMED NOV, yet failed to do so. Likewise, CRRUA continuously failed to meet the compliance deadlines set by NMED after the 2023 winter water crisis and four subsequent NOVs issued by NMED, which resulted in NMED's Administrative Order and Enforcement of Civil Penalties against CRRUA.⁶² Even after receiving NMED's Administrative Order, CRRUA continues to fail to comply with the NOV compliance deadlines, NMED's enforcement orders and ultimately, the SDWA. As such, CRRUA's ongoing disregard for NMED's authority as an enforcement agency only further necessitates DOJ's intervention and investigation into this matter.⁶³

As a result of CRRUA's ongoing failure to comply with the SDWA, residents of New Mexico's border region are experiencing adverse health effects that seem to be inextricably linked to the quality of water CRRUA provides. The range of adverse health effects community

https://cloud.env.nm.gov/resources/_translator.php/ODNkNmE2N2QwNDcxN2RiNmRmYWJhZTJhYV8xNjA3MzA~.pdf.

⁶¹ See *id.*

⁶² See Attachment 1.

⁶³ Community notes that CRRUA continues to assert that it is providing reliably safe and clean public water, in part attributing the fact that CRRUA received zero consumer calls about discolored water in June 2024 as "factual evidence of the progress CRRUA is making in its systematic efforts to continue providing safe water and reliable service to residents in Sunland Park and Santa Teresa." The drop in consumer calls and reports to CRRUA, however, is not due to the residents of Sunland Park and Santa Teresa now receiving consistently clean and safe public water; but because the community does not and cannot trust or rely on CRRUA to acknowledge, address, and remedy any further water quality issues reported by the public, given CRRUA's historic and ongoing disregard for the community's complaints, concerns, and ultimately, their safety. See Drew Pittock, *CRRUA Reports Zero Discolored Water Complaints Five Months Into New Monitoring Initiative*, KFOX14 (July 8, 2024), <https://kfoxtv.com/news/local/crrua-reports-zero-discolored-water-complaints-five-months-into-new-monitoring-initiative-camino-real-regional-utility-authority-new-mexico-dona-ana-county-santa-teresa-sunland-park>. Community further notes that NMED still has not acknowledged or issued a NOV for CRRUA's SDWA violation in mid-June 2024, reinforcing Community's concerns and distrust surrounding NMED's enforcement of CRRUA.

members are experiencing is broad, including, but not limited to: irritated eyes; skin rashes; diarrhea; dry, itchy, and irritated skin; and loss of hair.⁶⁴ Notably, these adverse health effects currently being experienced by community members are consistent with the adverse health effects of arsenic exposure in public drinking water, as listed by EPA.⁶⁵

Because CRRUA has a consistent history, since its creation in 2009,⁶⁶ of noncompliance with the SDWA as it pertains to maximum arsenic contaminant levels and public notification requirements, as well as a consistent disregard for NMED NOVs and enforcement efforts, Community respectfully requests DOJ launch a prompt and comprehensive formal investigation into CRRUA. CRRUA has repeatedly displayed a disregard for the safety and trust of the residents it serves, as well as a lack of accountability and responsibility for the public utility's ongoing noncompliance with the SDWA. In order to ensure residents of the Santa Teresa and Sunland Park communities begin receiving consistently clean and safe drinking water, it is imperative that DOJ take proactive measures to bring CRRUA into compliance with the SDWA and EPA's implementing regulations. To permit CRRUA to continue forward otherwise will only further harm the communities' public health and welfare.

B. CRRUA has and continues to violate the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Act by failing to consistently supply public water that meets federal health standards and by failing to provide timely public notice of contaminations and violations.

Because CRRUA has violated the federal SDWA, CRRUA's ongoing noncompliance also violates the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Act ("EIA"). Specifically, Sections 74-1-12 and 74-1-13 of the EIA require operators of public water supply systems "to comply

⁶⁴ See Attachment 5 [Images of Community Members' Health Effects]; *see also* Attachment 4.

⁶⁵ See *EPA Arsenic Consumer Fact Sheet*, *supra* note 24.

⁶⁶ See Joint Powers Agreement between the City of Sunland Park and Doña Ana County (Feb. 24, 2009), https://www.crrua.org/sites/default/files/JPA%20_Document.PDF.

with the federal Safe Drinking Water Act” and its monitoring, testing, and notification requirements, as established by EPA.⁶⁷ Public water supply system, under the EIA, “means a system that provides piped water to the public for human consumption and that has at least fifteen service connections or regularly services an average of at least twenty-five individuals at least sixty days per year.”⁶⁸

CRRUA is an operator of a public water supply system, as defined under the EIA, because CRRUA provides piped water to the public for human consumption, serves 19,466 residents, and has approximately 7,318 service connections.⁶⁹ Thus, because CRRUA is an operator of a public water supply system, CRRUA’s failure to comply with the SDWA also violates the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Act.

C. CRRUA has and continues to violate the New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations by failing to consistently supply public water that meets federal health standards and by failing to provide timely public notice of contaminations and violations.

CRRUA’s consistent violations of the SDWA and EPA’s implementing regulations, and blatant disregard for any enforcement and compliance measures taken against CRRUA by NMED, further violate New Mexico’s Drinking Water Regulations. Codified at 20.7.10 NMAC, the New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations primarily serve to ensure public water supply systems comply with both the federal SDWA and New Mexico’s EIA.⁷⁰ Namely, the State Drinking Water Regulations emphasize public water supply systems’ federal and state-mandated requirements to remain within the maximum contaminant level thresholds of Primary and Secondary Drinking Water Contaminants established by EPA, and promptly notify the public of a

⁶⁷ NMSA 1978 § 74-1-12; NMSA 1978 § 74-1-13.

⁶⁸ *Id.*(H)(2).

⁶⁹ See Attachment 1 (data obtained from NMED database).

⁷⁰ See 20.7.10.100 NMAC, 20.7.10.101 NMAC, 20.7.10.500 NMAC (incorporating the requirements of the SDWA and the EIA).

known violation within twenty-four hours.⁷¹ Further, the Drinking Water Regulations require a public water supply system to notify NMED if the water supply becomes endangered, as well as take proactive measures to protect the water supply in a timely manner.⁷²

As discussed above, CRRUA consistently exceeds the maximum contaminant level for arsenic, as well as fails to promptly notify the public of these contaminants within twenty-four hours, in violation of both the SDWA and the EIA. Thus, CRRUA's ongoing noncompliance and violations of these federal and state environmental protection laws, as well as its failure to notify NMED in a timely manner of such violations and take proactive measures to remedy the deficiencies in the public water supply, also violate the New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations.⁷³

Until CRRUA demonstrates a consistent and verifiable record of total compliance with arsenic maximum contaminant levels, which it has not yet been able to do in its fifteen years of operation, CRRUA will likely continue to violate both federal and state environmental protection laws as it provides residents with unsafe drinking water. Therefore, it is crucial that DOJ investigate and assist in bringing CRRUA into compliance with the applicable environmental protection laws to ensure that the communities of Santa Teresa and Sunland Park may finally enjoy their inherent right to clean and safe drinking water, as prescribed and protected by the federal Safe Drinking Water Act, the New Mexico Environmental Improvement Act, and the New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations.

⁷¹ See 20.7.10.100 NMAC (formal adoption of 40 § C.F.R. 141, including the federal maximum contaminant levels for arsenic and requirements for corrective actions when deficiencies occur); see 20.7.10.101 NMAC (formal adoption of 40 C.F.R. § 143); see also 20.7.10.600(C) NMAC (requiring public water suppliers to notify the public of appropriate action to protect themselves against any waterborne hazards).

⁷² See 20.7.10.400(E) NMAC.

⁷³ See Attachment 1 (NMED's Administrative Order listing CRRUA's failure to comply with the New Mexico Drinking Water Regulations).

III. DOJ and the State Auditor Should Investigate CRRUA for Violations of Consumer Protection Laws and Waste, Fraud, and Abuse of State and Federal Funds.

Community further seeks to provide DOJ and the State Auditor with additional information and input from community members regarding violations of consumer protection laws and the waste, fraud, and abuse of state and federal funds, respectively.

Primarily, Community raises concerns surrounding the requirement for CRRUA customers to continue to pay for public water that cannot be safely consumed nor used. This concern reached its peak during the water crisis of late winter, 2023, when CRRUA untimely issued public notices warning residents not to consume nor use the water, weeks after CRRUA should have known of the contamination and at least one week after CRRUA became aware of a potential water supply contamination based on consumer complaints directly to CRRUA.⁷⁴ Since this incident, the water quality serviced from CRRUA continues to be questionable at best,⁷⁵ with continued NOV's issued by NMED against CRRUA indicating CRRUA is still not in compliance with applicable law and CRRUA water supplies may be unsafe for use and consumption.⁷⁶ Thus, consumers who cannot use the water serviced by CRRUA continue to be charged for CRRUA's services, with no prior relief granted for the billing periods when the water was unsafe for consumption and use, and likely continues to be unsafe for the public to consume and use.

Despite CRRUA's consistent and ongoing violations of water quality standards, and blatant disregard for NMED's issued-NOV's and enforcement efforts, CRRUA recently announced it will be raising residential water and wastewater rates, effective on July 1, 2024.⁷⁷ Residential

⁷⁴ See Section II.A for in-depth discussion and details regarding the late 2023 water crisis.

⁷⁵ See *NMED Investigation Report for Camino Real Regional Utility Authority*, *supra* note 45, at 7 (NMED investigation revealing CRRUA staff should have been aware of an operational failure as early as November 23, 2023, and that CRRUA staff failed to implement the emergency response plan upon learning of operational failures and the resulting contamination); see Attachment 2.

⁷⁶ See *Enforcement Watch*, *supra* note 53.

⁷⁷ See *Pittock*, *supra* note 8.

water rates will increase from \$15.00 to \$17.83 for the first 3,000 gallons, and residential wastewater rates will increase from \$20.62 to \$27.00 for the first 7,000 gallons.⁷⁸ Appallingly, in support of these increased residential rates, CRRUA Executive Director Juan Carlos Crosby explicitly stated that “[t]he additional revenue received from the rate correction will be used to help ensure the health, safety, and welfare of customers,” listing the “benefits of higher rates” to include “[k]eeping arsenic levels in water within the federal limit of 10 parts per billion (ppb.);” “[m]inimizing the causes of discolored and smelly water;” and “[m]aintaining an uninterrupted flow of clean, clear water”⁷⁹ – thereby placing the financial burden on the residents of Santa Teresa and Sunland Park to remedy the ongoing water quality crisis that CRRUA is responsible for both causing and resolving, as the public utility for the region. Placing the financial burden on residential consumers is even more outrageous considering the fact that CRRUA has already received government money to remedy these water quality issues, and NMED Secretary James Kenney has publicly stated that, “[i]f CRRUA needed money, my department has \$100 million sitting in an account in which drinking water utilities can come in and request that money. If they know they need money to improve the operations. They could do that today.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, CRRUA customers have experienced additional charges to their water bills, likely as a result of CRRUA’s repeated requests for customers to “flush their water systems” for anywhere from

⁷⁸ See *id.* Meanwhile, at the same CRRUA Board of Directors Meeting where the CRRUA Board approved of the increased residential rates, the CRRUA Board also formally appointed Juan Carlos Crosby as CRRUA’s Executive Director at an annual salary of \$126,500. See Dave Burge, *CRRUA Board Votes to Increase Water, Wastewater Rates*, KTSM 9 El Paso (May 14, 2024), <https://www.ktsm.com/news/state-regional/new-mexico/crrua-board-votes-to-increase-water-wastewater-rates/>.

⁷⁹ See Pittock, *supra* note 8.

⁸⁰ See *supra* note 2 (Governor Lujan-Grisham’s public statement that “money has gone to clean up the water but that never happened”); see also Harrison Parker, *Secretary: Millions in State Funds Available for CRRUA Water System Improvements*, KFOX14 (April 10, 2024), <https://kfoxtv.com/news/local/secretary-millions-in-state-funds-available-for-camino-real-regional-utility-authority-crrua-water-system-improvements-new-mexico-nm-sunland-park-santa-teresa-environment-department> (emphasis added).

fifteen to thirty minutes before usage in an attempt to remedy these CRRUA-caused water safety issues.⁸¹ Notably, when residents attempt to contact CRRUA to discuss these increased charges, they receive little to no response from CRRUA.⁸²

CRRUA's indifference towards its customers' concerns surrounding their water bills and shifting of its responsibility, as a public utility, to provide residents and customers with consistently clean and safe drinking water, onto these communities, is indicative of the continued disregard CRRUA has for its legal responsibilities and for the community's water quality as a whole, as well as the necessity for DOJ and the State Auditor to ensure CRRUA comes into compliance with federal and state environmental and consumer protection laws. Just like when consumers alerted CRRUA to the water quality issues in November 2023, but CRRUA did not issue a public notice to alert and warn consumers that the water was unsafe to consume until one week later,⁸³ CRRUA continues to ignore consumer complaints and concerns now surrounding their utility bill charges, instead increasing residential water and wastewater rates – ultimately failing to provide any sort of relief for community members unwillingly subjected to this ongoing water crisis. Thus, Community requests DOJ and the State Auditor launch a prompt and thorough investigation into CRRUA for violations of consumer protection laws and waste, fraud, and abuse of state and federal funds.

IV. DOJ and the State Auditor Should Investigate CRRUA for Abuses and Violations of the New Mexico Open Meetings Act.

Finally, Community requests DOJ and the State Auditor investigate CRRUA for any and all abuses and violations of the New Mexico Open Meetings Act because CRRUA has displayed an

⁸¹ See e.g. Attachment 6 [CRRUA Water Flush Requests].

⁸² See Attachment 4.

⁸³ See Attachment 4; see also Danielle Prokop, *NMED: Water Utility in Doña Ana Co. Sent Customers 'High Levels of Arsenic' in Their Tap Water*, SourceNM (Jan. 8, 2024), <https://sourcenm.com/2024/01/08/crrua-arsenic-tap-water/>.

ongoing pattern and trend of canceling scheduled public meetings and rescheduling them as “special meetings,” as well as holding informal “town halls” with little to no reasonable public notice – raising abuses and violations of the New Mexico Open Meetings Act.

The New Mexico Open Meetings Act (“OMA”)⁸⁴ establishes New Mexico’s public policy that “all persons are entitled to the greatest possible information regarding the affairs of government and the official acts of those officers and employees who represent them.”⁸⁵ The OMA requires “[a]ll meetings of a quorum of members of any board, commission, administrative adjudicatory body or other policymaking body of any state agency or any agency or authority of any county, municipality, district or political subdivision, held for the purpose of formulating public policy, including the development of personnel policy, rules, regulations or ordinances, discussing public business or taking any action within the authority of or the delegated authority of any board, commission or other policymaking body are declared to be public meetings open to the public at all times.”⁸⁶ Further, the OMA requires such meetings to be held “only after reasonable notice to the public.”⁸⁷

CRRUA has conducted its public Board of Directors meetings in a manner that violates the New Mexico Open Meetings Act. Because these meetings often involve discussions of public business and actions by the Board, as it relates to the operations, management, policies, and services provided by CRRUA, these meetings must comply with the OMA. However, for years CRRUA has repeatedly canceled these public meetings, only to reschedule them less than 24 hours before the meeting, calling them “special meetings” instead, so as to seemingly circumvent the OMA’s requirement for reasonable public notice of a public meeting. In 2023, this occurred

⁸⁴ NMSA 1978 §§ 10-15-1 to 10-15-4.

⁸⁵ NMSA 1978 § 10-15-1(A).

⁸⁶ *Id.*(B).

⁸⁷ *Id.*(D).

thirteen times,⁸⁸ and continues to occur to date.⁸⁹ Members of the public thus are unaware of when CRRUA's public meetings are held, much less able to attend and participate meaningfully.

Furthermore, CRRUA has provided the incorrect Zoom link for these public meetings on multiple occasions, making the hybrid attendance option inaccessible to the public. Moreover, if members of the public attend a meeting in-person, they are, at times, unable to hear and understand the Board's deliberations and discussions because the microphones are turned off. Thus, even when CRRUA holds its public meetings as scheduled, which, as distrust and tension between CRRUA and the public has grown, seems to become more rare, these public meetings are essentially inaccessible to the public both in-person and virtually – in effect making these public meetings not open to the public, in violation of the New Mexico Open Meetings Act.

V. Relief Requested

Accordingly, Community respectfully requests that the New Mexico Department of Justice and the New Mexico Office of the State Auditor grant the following relief:

- 1) Initiate a prompt and comprehensive investigation into CRRUA for violations of environmental protection laws, as well as any violations of consumer protection laws and waste, fraud, and abuse of state and federal funds, and New Mexico Open Meetings Act abuses and violations, respectively, from 2009 to the present date, but also specifically within the following date ranges:
 - A. The three (3) years between 2009, the date of CRRUA's formation, and 2012, the date of CRRUA's first reported arsenic maximum contaminant level violation;
 - B. The three (3) years between January 1, 2020, to December 15, 2023; and
 - C. November 27, 2023, to the present date;
- 2) Hold a public listening session and an opportunity to submit public comments on the matter;
- 3) Require CRRUA to provide equitable relief to CRRUA customers impacted by these violations, including, but not limited to:

⁸⁸ See 2023 CRRUA Meetings, <https://crrua.org/meetings/2023> (last visited July 31, 2024).

⁸⁹ See 2024 CRRUA Meetings, <https://crrua.org/meetings/2024> (last visited July 31, 2024).

- A. Individual utility bill refunds, adjustments, and credits;
 - B. Provision of adequate amounts of clean and safe water, at no cost to the public; and
 - C. Any and all other equitable relief necessary to alleviate harm to CRRUA customers;
- 4) If warranted, reduce or eliminate funding for CRRUA; and
- 5) Take all other actions equitable and necessary to ensure CRRUA comes into and remains in compliance with all applicable laws and regulations.

Thank you for your consideration of these significant and impending issues, and we appreciate your prompt and thorough consideration of this Request. We look forward to continuing discussions with your Offices regarding this matter.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED on this 2nd day of August, 2024, by:

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