

Griswold: Drought-stricken East Porterville gets tank aid from Tulare County Deputy Sheriff's Association

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East Porterville residents whose wells have run dry can fill jugs from a new community water tank, the second in the community. Tulare community. Tulare County Deputy Sheriff's Association photo taken Oct. 9 2014

The Tulare County Deputy Sheriff's Association has donated a 5,000-gallon water tank in East Porterville, where hundreds of wells have gone dry.

Last week, the tank was filled with water trucked in from Porterville, and residents immediately began filling jugs.

It's the second temporary water storage tank for the low-income neighborhood where most homes have shallow wells that stopped producing in the drought.

Sgt. Mike Yandell, vice president of the Deputy

Sheriff's Association, said the group donated \$3,500 to the Tulare County Office of Emergency Services to buy the tank. "We're ecstatic we are able to help out in this way," Yandell said.

East Porterville has become the face of the California drought.

In August, The Fresno Bee and other newspapers reported that the county government was passing out free bottled water for use in cooking and drinking, as well as making nonpotable water available from a free water tank for flushing, laundry and bathing.

The Associated Press sent out a wire story, the Los Angeles Times later followed up with a newsfeature, and the New York Times ran a story with photographs two weeks ago.

The publicity is bringing national attention to the effects of the drought, said Andrew Lockman, manager of the Tulare County Office of Emergency Services.

"It's a disaster," he said. "It's not a tornado, it's not a hurricane, it's a quiet disaster."

In Tulare County, 430 domestic wells have gone dry, and surely there are many more that haven't been reported, he said.

East Porterville residents can apply for free bottled water delivery, paid for by a state grant, he said. Fears that the county will use the information from applications to arrest undocumented residents or declare homes uninhabitable are unfounded, he said.

Donations of bottled water are welcome — 2,000 cases of bottled water will be distributed from 1 to 5 p.m. today in East Porterville thanks to the Blue Ash, Ohio-based Matthew 25: Ministries — but officials are in the process of developing a longer-term fix that promises to restore at least some running water to individual homes, he said.

Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit community assistance group in Visalia, is experimenting with 300-gallon water tanks placed in yards and plumbing them into homes with PVC pipe for showers and flushing, said Chief Executive Officer Tom Collishaw.

The method is close to being perfected, he said. Bank of the Sierra, based in Porterville, donated \$50,000 to get the effort going. Financing a large-scale program from private and public resources appears likely, he said.

Tulare County Supervisor Mike Ennis, whose district includes East Porterville, said a long-term solution would be to hook up the area to Porterville's water system. But the city estimates such a project would cost \$20 million or more and would take years to complete, among other hurdles, he said.

Meanwhile, he said, wells are going dry all over the county: "It's not getting any better."