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## In Parched California, Town Taps Run Nearly Dry

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LAKE OF THE WOODS, Calif. — People in this mountain town straddling the San Andreas Fault are used to scrapping for water. The lake for which it is named went dry 40 years ago. But now, this tiny community is dealing with its most unsettling threat yet: It could run out of water by summer.

As of last week, just two of the five wells drilled into the dry lake bed that serve its 300 homes were producing water. The mountains of the nearby Los Padres National Forest got their first dusting of snow — and it was a light one — last week; it is the winter snow that feeds the wells come spring. People are watering trees with discarded dishwater, running the washing machine once a week, and letting their carefully tended beds of flowers and trees wither into patches of dusty dirt.

There are scenes all across California that illustrate the power of the drought. A haze of smog, which normally would be washed away by winter rains, hung over Los Angeles this week. Beekeepers near Sacramento said the lack of wildflowers has deprived bees of a source of food, contributing to a worrisome die-off. Across the rich farmland of the San Joaquin Valley, fields are going unplanted.



Matt Black  
Lake of the Woods, Calif., a tiny community used to dry conditions, is now dealing with the threat of running out of water by summer.

But for 17 small rural communities in California, the absence of rain is posing a fundamental threat to the most basic of services: drinking water. And Lake of the Woods, a middle-class enclave 80 miles from downtown Los Angeles, a mix of commuters, retirees and weekend residents, is one of the most seriously threatened. Signs along its dusty roadways offer stark red-on-white warnings of a “Water Emergency” and plead for conservation.



Matt Black  
A sign announcing the town's water levels.

“I didn’t think it would come to this,” said Diane Gustafson, the manager of the Lake of the Woods Mutual Water Company, as she greeted a team of county and state officials reviewing the community’s request for emergency funds to drill more holes. “Our wells are so deep. I have lived here for 40 years, and this is the first time we’ve had a problem like this.”

So far, nothing has seemed to have helped: not the yearlong ban on watering lawns and washing cars, not the conscientious homeowners who clean their dishes in the sink and reuse the gray water on trees,

not even the three inches of rain that soaked the area last weekend. Three attempts to drill new wells, going down 500 feet, have failed.



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prospect of running out of water for drinking or, no less alarming, to fight what many see as the inevitable forest fires on the way.

“I am very worried,” said Craig Raiche, 43, who works at the local hardware store, as he tended the dry brown dirt of his front yard here. “We understand what we are in the middle of. People have been cutting back considerably. I don’t see neighbors gardening anymore. I had a neighbor with flowers in front of her home — she let them all go.”

Kathy Hamm, 50, who works at the general store on the old lake, said that last year was bad “but not like this.”

“It’s been getting worse and worse,” she said. “People aren’t watering their lawns. Laundry one day a week. Doing dishes in the sink instead of using the dishwasher.”

The developments here offer a window into the anxieties and battles that may be ahead for many parts of this drought-stricken region should rain not return. Ms. Gustafson said the owners of summer homes threatened not to pay their water bills



Matt Black

Mr. Stowell inspected a water storage tank. His once-modest responsibilities have become time-consuming.

For a while, Lake of the Woods bought water from Frazier Park, five miles up the road, but that community halted sales as its water table dropped through the winter. Now Lake of the Woods is trying to line up alternatives, and fast: State officials predict the existing water supply will last no more than three months.

The town, which covers an unincorporated square mile of Kern County and has a population of about 900, says it is prepared to truck in water should the wells run dry, an expensive remedy that it employed briefly during a dry spell last year and that now looms as a potential fact of life here. Bob Stowell, a general contractor who is the unpaid chairman of the board of the water company, promises that no faucets in Lake of the Woods will go dry.

But that assurance is being met with skepticism from residents who, with every dry passing day, have grown uneasy at the



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Bob Stowell, a general contractor who is the water company’s chairman, promised that no faucets in Lake of the Woods would go dry, even though the town and other rural communities in California are poised to run out of drinking water. But his assurance is met with skepticism from uneasy residents.

after they were told they could not water their lawns; she has responded by vowing to cut off their water.

For Mr. Stowell, the once-modest obligations of running the water company have become time-consuming. He spends much of his day dealing with homeowners anxious about what the next season will bring, and scolding the occasional water scofflaws who resist the conservation directives.

“Hey, Bob, did that guy Cliff call you?” Rafael Molina Jr., who oversees the daily operations of this and neighboring water systems, said to Mr. Stowell. “He wants to snitch on one of his neighbors who is taking water.”

Mr. Stowell said most people were pitching in, but added: “There’s always the people who are driving around, calling in,

saying, 'My neighbor's doing this, my neighbor's doing that, and he's out there washing his car now. The water is running down the street, and he's got green grass.' ”

He said he had a simple message for any such offender: “I’m sure you’d rather take your shower than water your lawn.”

The isolated beauty of this community accounts, in large part, for why it is so hard to find water. Lake of the Woods is on the edge of Los Padres National Forest, all of it off-limits for exploratory drilling. It is 5,500 feet up in the mountains, resting on granite.

“It’s different in the San Joaquin Valley: You can drill and find water,” said David A. Warner, a senior community development specialist with Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit group that has been working with homeowners during the drought. “Up here in the mountains, it’s much harder. They’ve tried, they’ve really tried.”

This community lies atop on a nest of earthquake faults, anchored by the San Andreas Fault. That may not be entirely a bad thing; geologists have told water company officials that the best place to look for water this high in the mountains is where fault lines meet.

Mr. Warner said the situation was made worse because so many communities face similar challenges, and are responding by digging new wells. “The problem for them is there are only so many well drillers,” he said. “Farmers need water. Cities need waters. Everybody is lining up for a driller. We had a bid for test wells, and the driller said he won’t be able to be out there until April.”



Matt Black  
Austin Bates, a drill rig operator, at work on a well near Lake of the Woods.



Matt Black  
Sunnie Rose bought drinking water at a corner store.

And as the drought has shown no sign of easing, the water company, with emergency financial assistance from California, has intensified its efforts to find new water sources: buying land, opening up closed wells and drilling ever deeper.

“We did drill three test holes, and we found nothing,” Mr. Stowell said. “Went down, three, four, five hundred feet. And we didn’t find anything. Now we’re going to go down more, 1,000 feet.”

“We’ll keep drilling until we find water,” Mr. Stowell said as he trudged past a closed well, marked by a white cap. “We have three new test locations. We’re going to attempt to drill down and see if we can find more water. I suspect we will eventually find water.”

The situation has left people here confronting the kind of questions they say people who live in urban areas have never had to consider. “Where are you going to get your water from?” said Greg Gustafson, Ms. Gustafson’s son. “How can you flush your toilets? How can you take a shower? How can brush your teeth in the morning? It’s not a nice feeling knowing that your town could be completely turned into a ghost town because they don’t have a water supply.”