

The Bakersfield Californian

May 17, 2015

Lois Henry

LOIS HENRY: We need a plan for the next inevitable drought

I fear more and more people will soon experience first-hand the lack of a true disaster plan for our prolonged drought.

I wrote last year about how the plights of several small towns and neighborhoods in Tulare County had revealed how terribly unprepared California is for one of our most regularly occurring disasters.

Now it's happening in Kern County.

Kern, like most valley counties, is speckled with individual wells serving single homes and small community wells that serve from four to 20 homes.

Since the beginning of the year four domestic wells have gone dry near Arvin, Wasco and Caliente, according to what's been reported to the Kern County Environmental Health Department.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

At least 22 wells have gone dry or may go dry in the Rosedale area, according to Van Grayer, general manager of Vaughn Mutual Water Co., which serves about 10,000 customers in northwest metropolitan Bakersfield.

The owners of those wells have all come to Vaughn seeking emergency tie-ins. An emergency tie-in isn't cheap. It typically costs between \$10,000 and \$15,000 depending on where the infrastructure is, with water costs added on top of that. And it typically provides only enough to meet cooking and bathroom needs.

So what are well owners' options?

In the short term, there is some help. It's the long-term that's the bigger question, but we'll come back to that.

The state has made money available through the California Drought Assistance Act that counties can use to provide aid directly to residents, according to Georgiana Armstrong of the Kern County Office of Emergency Services.

Typically, state disaster relief money comes in the form of a 75 percent reimbursement to local governments.

Now, counties can contract with non-profits to provide relief and the state will pay 100 percent of the non-profit's costs.

"It's remarkable," Armstrong said of the freedom that change has given counties.

Which is why Kern recently contracted with Self-Help Enterprises, a non-profit housing and community development organization based in Visalia, to provide emergency relief for local residents whose wells have gone dry.

The plan is, if an individual or small community well goes dry, residents' first point of contact will be the Kern County Environmental Health Department, which will immediately send someone out to verify the dry well.

Then Self-Help will contact the resident, confirm the situation and develop options such as trucking in water to refill a tank, bringing in a water tank, helping hook the resident up to a larger system, etc.

The goal is for Self-Help to have an assessment done within 72 hours and emergency water to the resident within a week, Armstrong said.

"Now we're looking at what the county can do to assist in the interim, how to keep residents in their homes with water for those few days."

The American Red Cross is already working to cache bottled water in various areas around the county where problems have occurred in the past, so it can respond in hours.

"This is a new kind of disaster for us, for the state," Armstrong said. "So a lot of these systems are being developed and discussed as they're happening. The drought is so complicated and this is one small piece."

Long-term solutions are much more difficult, particularly because of funding. Wells owned by individuals are the worst off. That's because state and federal funds cannot be used to enhance private property, explained Paul Boyer with Self-Help.

"They really have to find their own resources," Boyer said of individual well owners.

The best they can hope for is a low-interest federal loan but they must qualify as low-income and rural. Or a credit union might make an unsecured loan to drill a new well. But most banks won't loan money on a property that doesn't have water, putting owners in a real Catch-22, Boyer said.

Community wells stand a better chance of getting state or federal help. But that money is often geared toward narrowly defined circumstances, Boyer said.

"If a community well has, say, 15 connections and serves more than 25 people, it's considered a community well and can qualify for certain types of funding," Boyer said. "But if it has five to 14 connections it's not eligible for the same types of funding and if it has less than five connections, it's not considered a system at all. So it's different for each one."

Part of Self-Help's mission is to sort through what funding is available from which state or federal pot and try to fit those grants to people in need.

As the drought has dragged on, that's becoming a taller order every day.

Particularly if a new well is needed. Boyer said Self-Help has to put together two or three sources of funding to drill a new well, which can cost \$30,000. It has more than 200 families on its waiting list for new wells and help for only about 30.

Of all the changes this historic drought may spur in California, I certainly hope one is that we come up with an actual plan for how to help residents through the next one.

And there will be a next one.