

The Modesto Bee

Stanislaus County leaders approve more drought relief for homes with failed wells

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By Ken Carlson

County government will offer more emergency assistance for residents living without a basic service – tap water.

Homeowners with failed wells in Stanislaus County are waiting for nine months or longer for overbooked drillers to sink new wells. In the meantime, there's no water in the pipes for showers, cleaning the dishes or washing clothes.

Tuesday, supervisors decided to team with Self-Help Enterprises to deliver temporary storage tanks to eligible homes. The tanks come with a pump and fittings for restoring water to the taps.

Keith Boggs, assistant county chief executive officer, said the storage tanks have provided welcome relief in other counties. The nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises has been providing drought assistance to counties in the San Joaquin Valley. It works with communities and residents on long-term solutions such as connecting to city water or loans for private wells.

It has provided the storage tanks as a temporary solution to more than 150 drought-stricken homes in Tulare County and assists other jurisdictions with dry or contaminated wells. The tanks provide 50 gallons of water daily for each person in the household and are refilled with water delivered on a routine schedule.

"I hope we can roll this out (in Stanislaus County) as soon as possible," Supervisor Bill O'Brien said.

Most of the dry domestic wells are in supervisorial districts represented by O'Brien and Vito Chiesa in the eastern portion of the county. With the state in the grips of a four-year drought, the county has documentation on more than 50 failed wells. It's also suspected that residential wells are affected by pumping for almond trees and vineyards.

Supervisors proclaimed a drought emergency Tuesday to make the county eligible for state reimbursements for costs of the temporary water assistance program, called TWA. In March, Gov. Jerry Brown approved \$1 billion for emergency drought relief statewide.

The county will continue working on details of providing a temporary water supply for eligible residents in the unincorporated area. An oversight committee will review and approve applications for the tanks and delivery service. Information on any costs for homeowners wasn't available.

Self-Help Enterprises will handle the site inspection to verify the condition of an applicant's well and if there's a feasible plan to fix or replace it. According to a plan approved Tuesday, homeowners will be responsible for plans and permits if electrical work is needed for installing the tank. Households will need to apply for a well permit, sign a lease agreement and agree to other terms required by Self-Help, the plan says.

The organization will coordinate and schedule the water deliveries.

The county has a loan program for replacing failed wells at owner-occupied homes. Boggs said the temporary water assistance is a second prong of the county's drought relief effort. He's also working on incentives for private drillers to reduce the wait time for new residential wells.