

County, nonprofit work to help communities with failed wells

By David Castellon

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After more than a dozen of her neighbors' home wells went dry over the past year, Amanda Onsurez considered her family lucky that their well in the rural, northern Tulare County community of Monson still worked.

That changed Wednesday night, when she tried to wash dishes and only a little water trickled out of the tap. After a few seconds, it stopped flowing altogether.

"Momma, when (will) the water come out?" her 4-year-old daughter, Miranda Rojas, asked the next morning. "Who drank it all?"

"There is no more water," Onsurez replied.

Onsurez, her daughter, husband and her in-laws share a small, modest house in Monson and, for at least awhile, they'll have to learn to cope without running water. That's what several of their neighbors did, some for weeks or months, after their own wells went dry.

"So I'm nervous about what's going to happen to us," she said.

Onsurez said she likely would drive herself and Miranda to her father's house in Tulare to shower there, and her husband and father-in-law likely would get large barrels and drive to friends' homes in Cutler or Dinuba and fill them with water to bring home. That way, the family can cook, bathe, wash dishes and flush the toilet.

A too-familiar story

It's a situation that has played out all too frequently for months across parts of Tulare County, and it likely will happen more as California's severe drought continues for a fourth year.

Experts say the Valley, and Tulare County in particular, are suffering some of the worst effects of the drought, though much of the attention and focus of drought-related assistance has been on the south county town of East Porterville. An estimated 780 residential wells there have gone dry, or nearly so. That's little more than half of the 1,527 dry residential wells reported to county officials.

East Porterville is the largest Tulare County community in the throes of a severe water crisis. And responses by county government have gotten a lot of attention. They range from working with a local nonprofit and government agencies to install and fill large water-storage tanks at some homes, to developing the long-term plan that involved obtaining \$2.2 million in grants to drill a new well for the city of Porterville.

Once that's done, Porterville has agreed to fill trucks supplying water for the home storage tanks in East Porterville. In addition, plans are established to eventually connect about 100 East Porterville homes to the city of Porterville water system.

But plans for East Porterville aren't the only long-term solutions county officials are developing to provide relief to county residents.

Denise England, water resource program manager for Tulare County, said at least four other communities in unincorporated Tulare County — some more clusters of homes than towns — are facing particularly severe threats of water loss.

And county officials, with the help of Visalia-based non-profit Self-Help Enterprises are working with state and federal agencies to obtain funding for reliable water sources for these communities.

They include Monson, where a single new community well is planned.

Some funding already available

Initial plans call for a large water-storage tank near the new well that would supply water for home storage tanks, many already installed by Self-Help Enterprises.

Eventually, an underground water line would be installed throughout the neighborhood, and residents would be able to connect their home water systems to the new water line, England explained.

Drilling the well and installing the water pump and tank will cost an estimated \$1.5 million. The county has obtained grant commitments to pay for two-thirds of that cost, and officials are waiting for word on whether a grant for the remaining \$500,000 will be awarded, she said.

If that happens soon, England said, drilling of the new well could begin in a couple of months. Installation of a distribution system to homes could take six to eight months more, provided grants are found to pay for it.

Dust Bowl redux

Then there is the Highland Acres subdivision west of Tulare. Residents often call it "Okieville," for those who transplanted there in the 1930s and '40s from Oklahoma's "Dust Bowl" calamity — many of whom were from Oklahoma.

"It's pretty much a dust bowl out here," said Billy Dunlap, who lives with his family in the house his great grandparents built in the early '40s.

Lawns that once were green are now brown — many with little or no grass left — a sign of how many wells have gone dry and how many residents are trying to conserve what little water their wells still have by not watering their yards.

Dunlap noted that on a windy day, so much dust can kick up that it's hard to see across the street.

"It's pretty bad," said his grandmother, Christine Dunlap. "We've got a lot of neighbors out of water. If it wasn't for the neighbors [who still have working wells] helping other people out, it would *really* be bad."

Of the 96 homes in Okieville, county officials say 20 have had wells go dry, but the Dunlap family said they worry that a lot more of their neighbors could run out of water before something can be done.

The family is getting by with two 2,500-gallon water tanks in their front yard. They were installed for free by Self-Help Enterprises and the county contracts to fill them periodically, paid for with state drought-relief dollars.

Of course, red tape

England said the county and Self-Help are working to get a community well drilled for Okieville, but first the residents must form a mutual water company to oversee the new system.

"And until that happens, they are not eligible to apply for funding for engineering, design work and construction," she said.

The estimated cost of the project is about \$500,000, she said, and the county is awaiting word of whether it will receive a state grant to cover it.

Two other trouble spots

The next two high-priority areas sit just south and just north of Visalia city limits.

One involves a single block on Avenue 322 just east of Highway 63. Several wells there are dry.

Another cluster of homes sits northwest of Avenue 264, near the former Liberty Elementary School, where 25 of 40 wells have failed.

Gabe Cappuccio, whose well is working, noted that over the past couple of years many neighboring houses have gone vacant as residents — mostly renters — ran out when their water did.

Because of both neighborhoods' proximity to Visalia and water lines for California Water Services Company — which operates the city water system — efforts are underway to connect both to Visalia's water system.

Earlier this week, the county Board of Supervisors approved an agreement to accept a state grant totaling \$170,101 for a water line along 322 that residents can choose to connect with, though they would have to pay the connection costs.

In addition, several Rotary clubs in Visalia have agreed to chip in \$20,000 to install wider water lines needed to serve fire hydrants.

England said the hydrants are required by ordinance but weren't needed when the neighborhood was entirely on wells.

County steps up

Because neither residents nor Cal Water are qualified to receive the necessary grant, the county is stepping in to pay the water company for its work, England said.

A similar plan is in development for neighborhoods off Avenue 266, south of Visalia, but it isn't as far along.

The rough estimate for that project is about \$266,000, and though no grants for it are yet obtained, Jessi Snyder, a community development specialist for Self-Help Enterprises, said the Rotary clubs have agreed to pay for the hydrants and wider water lines.

Although the cost of laying down community water lines and installing water meters likely will be fully covered by grant dollars, the cost to connect them to homes in most cases would be incurred by the property owners.

That cost may be just a few hundred dollars, but it could be more, depending on the distance between the main water line and connection locations.

"Most of the people here are field workers. We live in a poor economy here," Onsurez said, "and coming up with hundreds of dollars to pay for this would be difficult."

She urged whoever is involved in deciding to fund and green light these projects to hurry, because things could get a lot worse as the drought continues.

Tulare County drought at a glance

- As of Aug. 10, the county's Bottled Drinking Water Program has approved 1,071 qualified households to receive water. That's 38 more than a week earlier.
- Between Jan. 1, 2014 and Aug. 7 this year, Tulare County Environmental Health approved more than 3,782 drilling permits for wells.
- The Workforce Investment Board of Tulare County reports that 284 people have been laid off or have had their work hours reduced due to drought conditions.

- The United Way of Tulare County's 2-1-1 program, which people call to find assistance programs, has received 1,467 drought-related calls requesting referrals. That's 84 more than a week earlier.

- As of Aug. 9, FoodLink of Tulare County distributed 161,220 drought-related food-relief packages. That's 1,580 more than a week earlier.

Get updated information and links to apply for drought-related assistance on the Tulare County website, <http://www.tularecounty.ca.gov/emergencies>.