

# THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

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## Drought aid grows

By The Recorder

August 18, 2015

The Iglesia Emmanuel Church — Drought Center — on Leggett Street in East Porterville was a busy place Monday.

On the north side of the church more than 150 families turned out for the monthly food giveaway. Offered were fresh fruits and vegetables donated to the church.

On the south side the parking lot was full as people came to either pick up cases of bottled water or to sign up for drought-relief assistance.

“We’re fully staffed now,” said Community Services Employment Training (CSET) Executive Director Mary Escarsega of the office now located on the church property. “It’s steady” she said of the flow of people seeking help.

The office opened about a month ago, but until staff was beefed up, it was only open a few hours a day. That has changed. The office, located at the back of the church parking lot off of Leggett Street, is open at 9 a.m. Monday through Saturday. Escarsega said it closes at 5 p.m. when there is a church service, but stays open until 6 p.m. most nights and until 7 p.m. a couple of days a week.

There are four people working there now, but Escarsega said they will have as many as 11 people at the office to handle a myriad of duties, including handing out bottled water or signing up people for the county’s water tank program.

Tulare County Office of Emergency Services manager Andrew Lockman said the county has distributed 249 large tanks county-wide, the majority of those in the Porterville area.

“We did 40 tank installations last week and most of those were in East Porterville,” he said.

Escarsega said they hope to expand resources at the office to make it a “one stop” center for people to get assistance. The expanded hours and resources available will be highlighted during a Drought Resource Center open house from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. on Thursday, Aug. 27. Joining with CSET will be the Family Healthcare Network, the Health and Human Services Agency, Proteus, Self-Help Enterprises and United Way of Tulare County.

“We want to bring in all safety net folks county-wide to remind people what’s available,” said Escarsega.

### Help For Renters

Lockman said the county board of supervisors just approved the filing of the application to begin a renter relocation program. State law will not cover the cost of placing tanks at rental properties so those people have been falling through the cracks with no assistance.

Lockman said plans are to launch the program in mid-September. It will not only pay the cost of moving, but it will also cover the difference in rent costs for families. He said the Housing Authority of Tulare County will likely administer that program.

He said no one has an exact estimate on how many of those in East Porterville without water are renters, but he said it could be as high as 50 percent. Those people, unless their landlord agreed to a program to get a tank but no longer charge rent, have not received tanks.

Also, said Lockman, the county is in line for a \$750,000 grant which will continue to pay for bottled water to be distributed to those whose wells have gone dry. At last count, more than 1,500 wells have gone dry in Tulare County, more than half of those in East Porterville.

Lockman said Tulare County has received the bulk of the state’s drought-relief funds.

“Over 90 percent of disaster relief money from the state has come to Tulare County,” he said, explaining the county has received \$3 million in aid so far. The state has spent \$3.4 million to date.

Lockman said every conversation with the state focuses on Tulare County as it remains drought central in California.

#### How Long

Lockman said he would be very happy “if the need would go away tomorrow,” but he feels it will be at least another year or longer before the impacts of the drought are reduced to where it is not the focus it is today.

“No matter what happens with El Nino, it would take a year to see recovery. I think we’re looking at a number of years,” he said.

The planned board of supervisors meeting in Porterville on Aug. 25 has been postponed. Lockman said the idea was to get input on what are the next steps, but there are no new steps to discuss at this time. He said the meeting will be held at a later date.