

THE FRESNO BEE

Tulare County approves free water deliveries to rental homes in drought

By Lewis Griswold

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Aida Beltran, 41, checks the water level of the county tank of water in her front yard in East Porterville. The family is now enduring the drought after their well went dry last November. The Beltrons own their home. Tulare County supervisors this week approved a plan to take free water to renters who need it

Renters in Tulare County whose faucets are dry in the drought can now get free water for filling household tanks, the Tulare County Board of Supervisors said this week.

But the landlord must obtain a county permit and cover the costs of installing the tank, which are plumbed to the home to supply running water.

IT'S NOT A LONG-TERM SOLUTION.
Steve Worthley, Tulare County supervisor

The new policy was approved Tuesday after the state Office of Emergency Services posted written guidelines stating it would reimburse counties for 75 percent of the cost of water purchases for rental properties.

But water deliveries are good only as long as potable water is available, which may not be the case if the drought continues, officials warned.

"It's not a long-term solution," Board of Supervisors Chairman Steve Worthley said.

1,861

Domestic well failures reported in Tulare County

It's unknown how many rental properties in Tulare County are without running water, but 1,861 domestic well failures have been reported.

Of those, about 1,361 homes are still without running water, affecting an estimated 6,211 people, the county said.

"This may be slowing down a bit, but it's certainly not stopping," said Andrew Lockman, director of the Tulare County Office of Emergency Services.

THE COUNTY IS BUYING ABOUT 3 MILLION GALLONS OF POTABLE WATER PER MONTH.

Supervisors didn't take a vote, but a majority of them appeared to support the new policy.

At least one board member urged caution.

"This should be the responsibility of the landlord," Supervisor Allen Ishida of Lindsay said. "People have to stand up, and really this is their responsibility to supply water for their own homes and rental homes. It's not something the government can fix."

But Supervisor Pete Vanderpoel of Tulare said “this really is a disaster, a humanitarian crisis. ... We need to look at this on a case-by-case basis.”

Until now, the county has been supplying hauled-in water to tanks only for homeowners or their families. So far, the county has helped 441 homeowners get tanks, which typically are in the front yard.

Advocates for the poor said helping renters is the right thing to do.

“That really helps with a lot of things we take for granted, like taking a shower this morning,” said Paul Boyer, program director at Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit community assistance organization.

The county is buying about 3 million gallons of potable water per month from cities, public utility districts and private utilities, while United Way of Tulare County is covering the costs of hauling the water to the tanks, for which it is reimbursed by the state.

The cost of buying water is relatively small compared to the cost of hauling water, officials said.

Those who don't have tanks but have household incomes of less than \$50,000 a year may be eligible for free bottled water deliveries.