

Fresno County water tank program brings water where wells have failed

By Marc Benjamin

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Guillermo Lopez turns on the tap and gets water for the first time in eight months in his home near Fresno.

Guillermo Lopez and his family couldn't turn on their taps, flush their toilets or take a shower for the past eight months until Thursday, when a 2,600-gallon water tank was installed in their front yard.

When the family's well ran dry in February, they didn't realize what was occurring, even with a series of loud roars and grumbles from a well pump running around the clock that could only manage to push air mixed with spurts of water through their faucets.

"Within the week, there was no water," he said.

Shortly after the Lopezes' well went dry, Self-Help Enterprises held a meeting at nearby Orange Center Elementary School. Representatives of the nonprofit were visiting to discuss water quality issues, since water in the area contains contaminants such as uranium, nitrates and coliforms above state-regulated levels.

"About 80 percent of the wells in that area have some kind of contaminant in them, but then it went from a discussion about 'What's in my water?' to 'We have no water,'" said Sue Ruiz, a community development specialist with Self-Help Enterprises.

THEY WERE TESTING WATER FOR CONTAMINANTS, AND WE TOLD THEM THAT WE DON'T HAVE ANY WATER FOR YOU TO TEST, AND I THINK THAT CHANGED THEIR FOCUS HERE.

Guillermo Lopez, Orange Center School area resident

In the neighborhood near Daleville and Cherry avenues, some residents have drilled new wells while others are waiting for help after wells went dry. Those with owner-occupied homes, similar to the Lopezes, qualify to have water tanks installed. Self-Help has four families in owner-occupied homes it's assisting to get water tanks in the neighborhood, Ruiz said.

Fresno County Department of Public Health contracts with Self-Help. The tanks are paid for through California Disaster Assistance Act funding. Self-Help is contracting with the Fresno County Economic Opportunities Commission and Local Conservation Corps, which is installing the tanks.

Lopez, his mother, brother and his brother's 11-month-old daughter were trying to make the best of it. They were able to get free drinking water through Self-Help Enterprises to their home, about a mile south of Fresno city limits.

Lopez's family was using bottled water for flushing toilets and showering. Sometimes it required resourcefulness, such as finding just the right shower head online, one that uses pressure to push water up through the shower head.

Even though the new shower head worked as advertised, a shower required advanced planning. The family would heat drinking water on the stove and then mix it with room temperature bottled water. There were times, Lopez admits, that he drove to his sister's house in northwest Fresno just for a shower.

He could tell his neighbors were feeling the pinch, too. No grass is growing outside at any nearby homes, quite a change from a few years ago when lawns were green and mowers were buzzing by 7 a.m. most days.

"I haven't heard a lawn mower in I don't know how long," Lopez said.

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Self-Help's tank installations will restore a limited supply until the more permanent solution – water piped from Fresno – becomes available.

A consolidation project between Orange Center School and the city of Fresno will lead to a water line from the school so residents can connect. City officials say construction of the water line could be underway by February.

City water will connect up to 79 homes using a federal Emergency Community Water Assistance grant. Residents will have to pay the water connection fee, which is a fraction of the \$30,000 cost for drilling a new well. Some of the connection fee also could be offset by grants, Ruiz said.

Lopez said losing water made him appreciate it even more. For weeks after the well went dry, he would still turn the faucets out of habit. Then he saw how much water it took to flush a toilet.

"I never realized it took 2 1/2 gallons to flush a toilet until we had to pour the water in," Lopez said.