

Household Tank Program could cost county \$309,000

By David Castellon

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Staff members from Self-Help Enterprises unloads household water tanks in April at their Visalia headquarters. The tanks were among 492 to that have been installed so far across Tulare County through the state-funded Household Tank Program to help homeowners whose wells have run dry. Tulare County is paying for the water to fill the tanks, but it's being reimbursed just 75 percent of their costs from state money set aside for emergency drought relief through the California Disaster Assistance Act.

emergency response programs to provide water, supplying more than 2.86 million gallons a month to homes with 2,500- to 3,000-gallon water tanks paid for with state dollars for emergency drought response.

"As of last week, we had 492 installed in the county," said Lutz, adding that obtaining water to haul to the homes with tanks remains the biggest limit to providing assistance to people out of water.

The county has caught a break, however, after recently entering an agreement with the state-run Porterville Developmental Center to provide a million gallons of water a month from its wells.

"We had been at the maximum of our available supply of water," in the south county until that additional water became available, Lutz said.

Plans are to truck part of that allotment to the northern part of the county to fill tanks in the Dinuba and Cutler-Orosi areas, where the demand also hasn't been meeting the available supply, Lutz said.

He conceded to the supervisors that "It's a long haul. It's very, very inefficient" to truck water that far, but right now there aren't any closer options to get water to dry homes there.

So by year's end, the county could end up having more water available than it needs to provide to homes with dry wells, but that won't last long, Lutz told the supervisors, noting that as more homes' tanks are installed, the county could start falling short of available water within 120 to 180 days from now.

Programs to provide water to residents of unincorporated Tulare County whose wells have run dry could cost more than \$4.1 million by year's end, with the county footing more than \$309,000 of that bill.

But the biggest challenge to continuing the mostly state-funded programs — which has included proving bottled water to people as well as installing and filling water tanks at hundreds of homes — will be finding new, local water sources to keep up with the growing demand for water assistance, as more wells go dry due to the Valley's fourth year of severe drought.

So far, the county has receive reports of more than 2,000 residential wells failing in the county, and it's suspected that more have gone unreported, Tim Lutz, the county Health and Human Services Agency's fiscal operations director, told members of the county Board of Supervisors during their regular weekly meeting on Tuesday.

Based on yearly numbers, an average of 116 dry wells are being reported dry every month, he said.

In response, the county is overseeing a number of

On average, about 40 households in the county are being added to the list requesting tanks and water through the Household Tank Program, according to data provided by the county Office of Emergency Services.

“We know we are going to see a shortage in the foreseeable future,” and efforts are underway to get more water, Lutz said.

That has included the county obtaining a \$1.7 million in grants to drill and install a well for the city of Porterville which will be used to supply water for East Porterville — the community with the largest cluster of dry wells.

The Porterville well already has been drilled, and over the next week tests will be conducted to determine how much water it can produce.

That’s a possible long-term solution to water problems. Short-term solutions include the county’s Household Tank Program, which includes installing the household tanks and periodically filling them with water, supplying bottled water to homes, assessing water needs in communities and public outreach.

Much of that work is being done by nonprofits, including Visalia-based Community Services Employment Training and Self-Help Enterprises, which is benefiting the county because those organizations are being fully reimbursed for their costs — about \$3 million so far — through the California Disaster Assistance Act, Lutz said.

So while Tulare County isn’t paying the costs to install home water tanks or to haul the water to those tanks, it is buying the water, itself and incurring some additional costs.

Of that, the county is receiving only a 75 percent reimbursement from CDAA for the water it buys and none for hundreds of hours county workers are spending administering and running the program, along with the “day-to-day projects related to drought activity,” Lutz said.

From July of last year through September of this year, CDAA reimbursed \$506,402 of the county’s costs, but not an additional \$165,556 which the county paid for through its General Fund, its primary pot of funds.

And by year’s end, Lutz estimated the county could spend another \$140,653 that the state will not reimburse.

This calculation doesn’t factor in the possibility of the county opting to fill tanks for rental units without water if the landlords buy tanks and pay to install and plumb them to county standards.

The supervisors have directed county staff to look into providing this service to renters, but no decision on whether to offer it has been made.

Lutz said county officials estimate that at least 200 rental properties in the unincorporated county are without water — though probably a lot more — and without additional water sources the county may be hard pressed to provide them water.