

Water on the way for Matheny Tract

By Luis Hernandez

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Matheny Tract resident Albertina Gutierrez uses some strong adjectives when describing the water that comes out of the tap at her home.

“The water is dark,” she said. “It looks very ugly. It smells like bleach. The water that comes out is bad.”

Come June 1, Gutierrez, who has lived at Matheny Tract for 31 years, said she hopes the water coming out of her tap is crystal clear and odorless. She also said she hopes the days of buying expensive filters and long trips to water machines are over.

Thanks to an order from the State Water Resources Control, Matheny Tract residents will start receiving service from the Tulare municipal system. The resource board ordered the consolidation of Tulare’s system and Pratt Mutual Water Company, marking the first time the state uses the law.

“We are pleased to use Tulare as the first test case,” said Ashley Werner, an attorney who represented the Matheny Tract group. “We are pleased we arrived at a resolution.”

Werner is with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Responsibility.

“This is a good thing,” Tulare Public Works Director Joe Carlini said.

Under the same order, Soultis Tract residents will also become Tulare water system users, Carlini said.

“They want us to give them clean water,” Carlini said.

The connection to Matheny Tract was needed because the arsenic level in the water is too high and unhealthy.

Matheny Tract is located south of Tulare.

There are 321 water connections, said West Valley Construction Foreman Bill Brewer. West Valley, continuing their work at Matheny Tract, is the company installing the water meter.

Carlini said there are 35 connections at Soultis Tract. To bring water from the Tulare system, some improvement needs to be completed, Carlini said. State funding will come to help pay for those fixes.

At Matheny Tract, the work is nearly done. Since March 22, the crew Brewer leads has installed 100 water meters. On Average, the crew puts in about 15 in a day, Brewer said.

After the meters are installed, Carlini said there’s additional work to be done before the water can flow down to Matheny Tract. The delivery system must be flushed, removing impurities.

Wegner said she’s pleased with the systems’ merging.

“This is a great victory for the Matheny Tract group,” she said. “They have secured their right to safe drinking water.”

The state's order comes after legal wrangling that included a lawsuit from Tulare and counter legal action. The state's order is part of the legal action settlement.

"The Matheny Tract group is aware we don't need to go to unnecessary litigation," Wegner said.

There are minor details to be worked out to completely settle all litigation, Wegner said. There are meetings scheduled this week that will likely lead to the settlement.

Matheny Tract resident Blas Tena said he's aware work on the water meters is on-going. And while a meter hasn't been installed at his home, Tena said he knows water service will improve.

"We'll just wait to see when they installed them," Tena said.

Dealing with the arsenic-filled water, Tena said his family buys bottled drinking water and additional water is trucked in from a relative's well west of Tulare.

Similar to Gutierrez, Tena said he's looking forward to when his water comes from the Tulare system and there's a need to buy drinking water.

Self Help-Enterprises Community Development Specialist Jessi Snyder said Matheny Tract residents must establish a water customer account with Tulare. In addition, residents must stretch their water line their property limit. The workers' installing the water meter can't go into the property. Snyder said there are about 20 Matheny Tract residents who haven't completed the plumbing work.

Snyder said she's pleased with the work was done to bring potable water to Matheny Tract.

"It's essential for folks at Matheny Tract to get clean drinking water," she said. "This is a beautiful project. This is an example of how city and communities can work on a project together."

Self Help-Enterprises is located in West Visalia and is involved in projects around the county and the San Joaquin Valley.

Carlini said he expects no problems for Tulare's system as the new connection are added.

"There's always a concern regarding our system," he said. "We don't see an issue."