

NPR VALLEY PUBLIC RADIO

As California Lifts Drought Restrictions, Rural Areas Still Lack Running Water

April 10, 2017

By: Kirk Siegler

While the deep snowpack in California's mountains is easing drought concerns, there are still people in the state's rural Central Valley who don't have water running from their taps.

AUDIE CORNISH, HOST:

California Governor Jerry Brown has declared an end to his state's five-year-long drought. Emergency water restrictions have been lifted for most Californians, but not all. In some of the hardest hit areas in the rural Central Valley, there are still thousands of people living without any running water. NPR's Kirk Siegler sent this report from Porterville, Calif.

KIRK SIEGLER, BYLINE: A two-lane highway is clogged with 18-wheelers hauling crates of oranges. And as you drive deeper into the San Joaquin Valley, the radio stations switch from country to Spanish.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SIEGLER: The farmworkers are back, picking fruit in the lush groves lining the road, their pickups parked in the dirt by the trees.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

SIEGLER: Through the haze, you can just make out the snow-capped Sierra Nevada. By all accounts, California looks to be finally emerging from a brutal drought. But on the outskirts of Porterville, pull into Raul Mendez's driveway, and all is not as it seems.

RAUL MENDEZ: With this rain, I was thinking maybe we're probably going to get the water level higher, but it's not happening.

SIEGLER: In the gravel driveway of Mendez's tidy stucco house is a huge, black 2,500-gallon water tank. His well dried up a couple of months back.

MENDEZ: Yeah, this is the well.

SIEGLER: His is one of some 550 households in this area alone that the state is helping out. California disaster aid pays for water deliveries once a week. Mendez's family is adjusting to the rationing.

MENDEZ: I don't wash clothes and everything. It's just a quick shower, so we can't let the water run.

SIEGLER: You go to the laundromat?

MENDEZ: Yeah, we go to the laundromat. Yeah.

SIEGLER: Mendez is middle class. He owns an auto repair shop in town and says his family has never had to ask for help, but they were running out of options. They couldn't afford to drill a new, deeper well right now.

MENDEZ: We're talking 25,000. And to have 25,000 right now (laughter) - with an emergency, that's not going to happen.

SIEGLER: People here are relieved that the governor's emergency drought aid isn't going away, as feared. The amount of need is still huge. A few miles from Mendez's house, under the hot afternoon sun, two men in overalls are hooking up water hoses to a semi-truck.

(SOUNDBITE OF ENGINE)

SIEGLER: This water will go to rental houses and mobile shower stations. David de la Cruz, the supervisor here from the local United Way, says despite all the rain, he's still getting reports of new well failures every day.

DAVID DE LA CRUZ: It's the ground water that's not replenishing, pretty much. We're still having a major issue, even with the rain that we did receive. It didn't saturate.

SIEGLER: At the height of the drought, the already stressed water table in the Central Valley dropped even lower. Farmers dug deeper wells and pumped more water than usual to keep their crops alive. But pointing the finger at farmers is touchy in a rural community that's almost entirely dependent on California's multibillion-dollar agriculture industry.

(SOUNDBITE OF ROOSTER CROWING)

SIEGLER: So people here seem much more comfortable talking about the long-term solution going forward, which is to hook homes with dry wells onto nearby municipal water systems so there's less risk. Jessi Snyder with a local group called Self-Help Enterprises says convincing people to get annexed into the city has sometimes been a tough sell.

JESSI SNYDER: There are a lot of people out here on fixed incomes who simply don't want another monthly bill.

SIEGLER: And there are bigger cultural reasons, too.

SNYDER: A lot of it has to do with the simple idea of living inside of the city, as opposed to living in an unincorporated county area because the rules are different. The animal permissions are different. You know, you can hear. People have plenty of animals out here.

SIEGLER: About 300 homes have been connected here already, but there's aid money for at least a thousand more. So Snyder is going door to door, checking in with folks who are eligible to be hooked onto the city of Porterville's system.

SNYDER: (Speaking Spanish) OK. (Speaking Spanish).

SIEGLER: Roberto Aguilar, a fruit picker who lives on this street, tells Snyder that his family's well hasn't run out yet.

ROBERTO AGUILAR: (Speaking Spanish).

SIEGLER: But he tells her he's planning to hook onto the city just to be safe. You need water to live, he says. Kirk Siegler, NPR News, Porterville, Calif.

(SOUNDBITE OF GROUNDISLAVA SONG, "DIG")