

THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

Drought assistance may end

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By: The Porterville Recorder Staff

State planning on cutting funding June 30

More than two years of assisting families whose private water wells went dry during the drought may be coming to an end.

Gov. Jerry Brown declared April 7 the drought was over in California, except in four counties, including Tulare. However, the state has said it will not fund drought assistance programs past June 30.

Tulare County has been ground zero for the drought, especially East Porterville where the state is spending \$50 million to connect those rural residents to the City of Porterville's water system. That program immediately helped more than 150 families whose wells went dry and could connect up to 1,000 homes to the city's system.

Since the drought surfaced in the summer of 2014, Tulare County, funded by the state, has been assisting families at a cost at one time estimated to be more than \$500,000 a month. That amount has dropped considerably as homes in East Porterville get hooked up to the city, several families solved their own problems and with some wells coming back and pumping water once again.

Still, said Jason Britt, head of the county's Health and Human Resources Agency, as of April 7 there were still 90 domestic wells dry in the county and 468 residences still on the bottled water program.

"In the last six months resolutions have really increased," Britt told county supervisors during their weekly meeting Tuesday. He said the number of household tanks have dropped off considerably with less than 10 still left in East Porterville.

Since the county began its bottled water program in September of 2014, more than \$19 million has been spent on drought assistance. He said the California Disaster Assistance Act has reimbursed the county for 75 percent of its costs, meaning the county has spent \$585,000. He said the county is still spending \$30,000 a month on the portable showers set up at the Drought Resource Center on South Leggett Street in East Porterville, roughly \$15,000 on the portable tanks which were placed around the county to provide non-potable water and \$9,000 a month to purchase the water for the household tank program. Delivery of that water, which runs about \$600 a month per household, is being handled by non-profit agencies at 100 percent reimbursement.

Now, with a near-record rainfall year, the state is putting the drought behind it and is ending drought assistance.

"We are still seeking clarification," Britt told supervisors. He said they are trying to find out who owns the tanks and if the state will pay to reclaim them. If not, then the county would end the tank program prior to June 30 so it has funding to collect those tanks.

Britt said they are asking the state to stretch funding for a while to give it time to "demobilize."

He also said if the county wanted to pick up the assistance, it would cost about \$4 million a year.

"We cannot step into this program and continue it," said Supervisor Steven Worthley. He suggested, if possible, to give the tanks to property owners if they want to pick up the cost of having water delivered, noting, "The drought is over, but not the affects."

Paul Boyer and Susan Adkins with Self Help Enterprises, which has been assisting in drought relief, both encouraged the board to seek an extension of funding. Boyer noted there are a few permanent solutions in the works in other areas of the county, but they won't be completed by June 30.

Adkins said there are approximately 500 families in the county who don't have a permanent solution and there still is not enough money available to assist property owners in drilling a new well, which she said costs on average about \$27,000.

Britt said they will return to the board once the county gets more clarification as to the end of funding, but the consensus of the board was to end the residential drought assistance program when state funding ends, which looks like June 30.