

THE FRESNO BEE

“The drought is not over’: Residents still getting water from temporary tanks fear cutoff

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DEL REY

For Fresno County resident Anne Schmidtgall the California drought never ended.

Two years ago, the well on her property east of Del Rey went dry when the casing caved in. Getting it fixed will cost \$19,000, money she doesn't have.

So Schmidtgall began filling 25-gallon jugs at a friend's house about three times a week. That went on for a year.

But she has cancer, and soon lacked the strength to move the heavy jugs.

She called Self-Help Enterprises in Visalia, a nonprofit that operates a state-funded program in a seven-county region that helps residents whose wells have gone dry.

Last year, a large, green water tank — a symbol of the California drought in rural areas — was trucked to her yard and hooked up to her home's plumbing. Finally, she had running water for showers, sinks and toilets.

"This type of program is excellent," Schmidtgall said. "It makes you feel like a human being again. It's a godsend."

The program covers the cost of tank installation, and the tank is filled every two to three weeks by a water hauler, also paid for by the state.

Now Schmidtgall worries that the water tank on her property might be left empty because funding for the program runs out June 30.

Schmidtgall, who has lived on the property for more than 50 years, said she's not taking advantage of the state.

"I don't live on any type of welfare," she said. "We're a working family. We're honest people."

The state started the water tank program three years ago when it declared a drought. At the height of the drought, 1,200 homes in the central San Joaquin Valley had tanks in their yards.

There are still more than 300 families in the Valley whose homes have tanks.

But there's no money allocated in the new state budget to keep the program going past June, said Susan Long, a program director at Self-Help Enterprises.

She said officials in Sacramento sometimes express surprise that funding is still needed because they assume the drought is over. After all, 2016-17 was a wet year and there was enough rain and snow this year to get by for another year.

"The drought is not over," Long said. "I would like Sacramento to know that."

The Legislature still might fund the program.]

Two weeks ago, Assemblyman Joaquin Arambula, D-Fresno, testified before an Assembly budget subcommittee requesting \$23.5 million be added to the state budget for water needs. Of that, \$3.5 million would be for the water tank program and emergencies.

The number of water tanks in use will drop as new wells are drilled, but the tank program is needed because wells are still going dry, he said.

"Households need immediate, ongoing access to water," he testified.

In the long-term, drilling new wells or connecting to community water systems, as happened in East Porterville and Monson in Tulare County, is the answer, Long said: "It just takes longer than most folks would expect."



Anne Schmitdgtall stands in front of a temporary water tank that supplies water to her home in rural Fresno County. **LEWIS GRISWOLD** The Fresno Bee