

THE PORTERVILLE RECORDER

Program offering free nitrate testing for low-income households with private wells expanded

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By Porterville Recorder staff

Self-Help Enterprises has extended a free nitrate testing program to help low-income residents in the Porterville area learn about their water quality and the risks of consuming contaminated water. Interim drinking water supplies will be provided at no cost for qualified households that are tested and found to have a nitrate exceedance.

Information and participation forms are available at the Porterville Family HealthCare Network clinic, Porterville Community Services and Employment Training (CSET) office, and the Porterville Area Coordinating Council (PACC) office.

An appointment can also be scheduled directly with Self-Help Enterprises by calling (559) 802-1678. A staff member will meet the participant at their home at a designated time to collect a water sample. Results are usually provided within one week.

“Safe, clean water is important for drinking and cooking. However, many residents in these communities rely on private wells, and they don’t know what contaminants are in their drinking water,” says Vanessa Soto, Community Development Project Manager with Self-Help Enterprises. “We encourage residents to participate in this free program to learn about their water quality and help keep their family healthy.”

Residents who rely on private water wells as their primary source of drinking water may be consuming water with contaminants such as nitrates. Nitrate, a form of nitrogen found naturally in small amounts in soil and water, is the most widespread contaminant in groundwater.

The United States Environmental Protection Agency has set the Maximum Contamination Level for nitrates at 10 mg/L. Some land use practices and human activities can increase the amount of nitrates in groundwater to dangerous levels.

Unlike city water systems that test their water regularly to make sure it is safe, it is up to private well owners to test their well water. Wells in this area commonly contain unsafe levels of nitrates, which are odorless and have no taste. Therefore, the only way to know if well water has nitrates is to test the water.

In an effort to inform residents about their water quality, Central Valley Salinity Coalition (CV SALTS) funded Self-Help Enterprises to sample for nitrates in private wells in the Porterville area. This program, which initially began as a pilot program in August 2016, has been expanded through May 2019. The expansion of the program is funded by CV SALTS and covers all costs to collect and test water samples.

To qualify, families must be low-income, reside in the Porterville area, and have a private well on their property or rental property. Immigration status is not a requirement of the program.

If test results exceed the Maximum Contamination Level, a replacement water option is provided through bottled water deliveries or installation of a Point of Use (POU) Water Filtration device. A POU device is installed at a single water connection, typically under the counter of a kitchen sink. The system will filter the water through reverse osmosis and deliver water that is suitable for drinking.

The provision of interim water supply options will be restricted to households with pregnant women, infants, children, elderly, terminally ill, and or/disabled persons. Infant formula made with water that has high nitrate levels can restrict the flow of oxygen to the body and lead to “blue baby syndrome” or even death.

Additionally, cooking with nitrate-contaminated water is dangerous as the nitrates become more concentrated when water is boiled.