

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Valley town with bad wells gets ‘surprise’ visit from Gov. Newsom — who wants tax on water

January 11, 2019

By: Erin Tracy and Sophia Bollag

A day after proposing a tax on drinking water, Gov. Gavin Newsom took a “surprise” road trip to meet with Stanislaus County residents in a community known for having unsafe wells.

Newsom and his cabinet made their first stop at the Monterey Park Tract in Ceres, where he held a roundtable discussion with people who for years had to use bottled water for drinking and cooking because their community’s two wells were contaminated with nitrates and arsenic.

Newsom said he’s committed to helping communities around the state find clean sources of water. A McClatchy [investigation last year](#) found that 360,000 Californians, most of whom live in the San Joaquin Valley and Mojave Desert, are served with drinking water that does not meet state safety standards for toxins.

“It’s only day five or six of the administration but, look, the issue of safe drinking water, affordable drinking water, is top of mind,” Newsom said. “I made that a point in yesterday’s budget. I made a point to emphasize that it’s a disgrace that in a state as wealthy and resourceful as ours that a million-plus people don’t have access to safe, clean drinking water.”

Newsom did not announce his trip to Stanislaus County. He wrote on Twitter that he wanted the members of his cabinet to hear “directly from folks who lack affordable, clean water.”

The budget proposal he released on Thursday includes about \$190 million for safe drinking water projects. It also asks lawmakers to implement some kind of fee that would pay for future work.

Last year, lawmakers considered a fee of 95 cents a month that would have provided about \$110 million a year for drinking water projects. The effort failed, but Newsom indicated he wants to revive it.

The residents he met on Friday benefited from a 2016 project that connected their community of 200 to the city of Ceres water system.

Jessi Snyder, community development manager for Self-Help Enterprises, which helped the community secure funding for the project, was at the meeting with Newsom Friday.

She said even two years after the waterline connecting the community with Ceres was completed, some residents still are skeptical of their drinking water.

That skepticism was compounded Thursday when residents learned the water from Ceres tested positive for the cancer-causing chemical for 1,2,3 - TCP.

TCP is a chemical that in the past was used in soil fumigants mostly in the Central San Joaquin Valley, according to the State Water Resources Control Board.

Francisco Diaz, Monterey Park Tract Community Services District Board President, said he was notified by the county Thursday that Ceres' water tested positive for the chemical but that the levels are well below what is considered unsafe.

He said he was required to notify residents but that the water is still safe to drink.

After his discussion in Ceres, Newsom headed to Grayson School in west Stanislaus County.

There, he met with community members in a session that was closed to media.

Newsom said his main goal with Friday's visits was to listen.

"I want to understand the magnitude of what you've been struggling with for years," he said. And, he said, he wanted his cabinet to understand as well.

The trip was a surprise to them, as well; they were expecting a staff meeting today.

"They didn't know they were coming," Newsom said. "I threw them on a bus and said, 'Guess where we're going?'"