

VALLEY PUBLIC RADIO

Unsafe Drinking Water Is Bad Enough: But What If You're The One Tasked With Fixing It?

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By: Kerry Klein

When the federal government reduced how much arsenic it would allow in drinking water in 2006, the water system in Jim Maciel's Central Valley community was suddenly considered unsafe to drink. Bringing that arsenic content back down to a safe level required a lot of work, as he explains to a few colleagues at a water leadership institute in Visalia. "It took us about 8 years and \$9.2 million to comply with their new standards," he says. "And we just got that plant online in September of 2017."

"Eight and a half years," says Raul Barraza, Jr., who can't help but connect the stress of running a water system with the thinning grey hair on Maciel's head. "Jim's hair was black back then," he jokes.

The two of them are attending the 2019 Rural Communities Water Managers Leadership Institute, a free 6-month program offered by the Visalia-based non-profit organization Self-Help Enterprises. During one Saturday a month, it offers workshops and field trips to help local water leaders navigate the state's byzantine water regulatory system. It's called in roughly 20 attendees from across the San Joaquin Valley, from Fresno and Bakersfield to Poplar and Three Rivers.

Maciel is a board member with the Community Services District in Armona, an unincorporated community of about 4,000 people between Hanford and Lemoore. "It's just a nice little community," he says. "We have quite a few retired farmworkers, as well as just elderly people."

He himself has retired from his job selling agricultural equipment, but he's served nearly 20 years on this board, which manages not just drinking water, but also Armona's sewage and garbage services. He's helped solve the community's arsenic problem twice, finally providing water that's now safe to drink directly from the faucet.

Still, living in an unincorporated community presents challenges that don't happen in big cities like Fresno or Bakersfield. "They have paid staff goes to their meetings, but in communities like Armona and Home Gardens and hundreds of us, we're volunteers," he says. "I'm lucky enough to be retired



Around 20 water leaders from across the San Joaquin Valley have signed up for the 2019 Rural Communities Water Managers Leadership Institute, a 6-month program offered by the Visalia non-profit Self-Help Enterprises.

and I can go to a lot of these meetings, but the people out there that're working, you have to just keep your jobs."

He's come to the institute to learn how to better serve his community and to share ideas with those in similar positions in other communities. And there are a lot of them: More than 300 water systems in California are currently out of compliance with state code, leaving 1.5 million people with potentially unsafe drinking water. Half of those systems are in the San Joaquin Valley.

There are solutions, but accessing them can be fraught with obstacles. Take it from Raul Barraza, Jr., director of the Community Services District in the Kern County City of Arvin. The city just recently secured a \$14 million state loan to mitigate arsenic contamination, but Barraza explains that every step getting there was costly—even simply commissioning a feasibility study. "That's \$150,000 to \$200,000, and for a small community, that's huge," he says. "Just to assess the problem. Just to have experts come in and tell you this is what you're going to need to solve your problem."

Time and money present challenges, but so can maintaining relationships with residents. Frances Elkhorn helps manage the water for Fuller Acres, a tiny unincorporated community outside Bakersfield whose water is contaminated with a carcinogen known as 1,2,3-TCP. "We had a meeting Thursday night and we had four households show up out of 142," she says. "We told them it's about the quality of their drinking water, it's your health issue, and we had four households show up."

And the decisions aren't easy: When faced with contamination, do you drill a new well, install a treatment facility, or figure out something else? To pay for it, should you apply for a state loan or grant, raise your local water rates, or both? That's not even to mention the long list of state and federal agencies to comply with.

"All of that's just incredibly complicated," says Eva Dominguez, the project manager with Self-Help Enterprises who designed this year's institute. It's the third time the organization has offered the program, and one of the goals this year is to galvanize local water leaders to make their voices heard beyond their communities, by regional and statewide decisionmakers. "They may not be the



Jim Maciel, right, and Raul Barraza, Jr. take part in a group discussion on challenges in local water management.



Raul Barraza Jr., Frances Elkhorn, center, and Eva Dominguez discuss conflict in local water management.

ones sitting on those boards, but they do have the ability to influence some of those decisions,” she says.

That’s why Jonathan London, a professor studying community development and environmental justice at UC Davis, says programs that foster water leadership in rural communities are critical. “They’re really on their own, and they’re facing these really substantial cumulative health burdens,” he says.

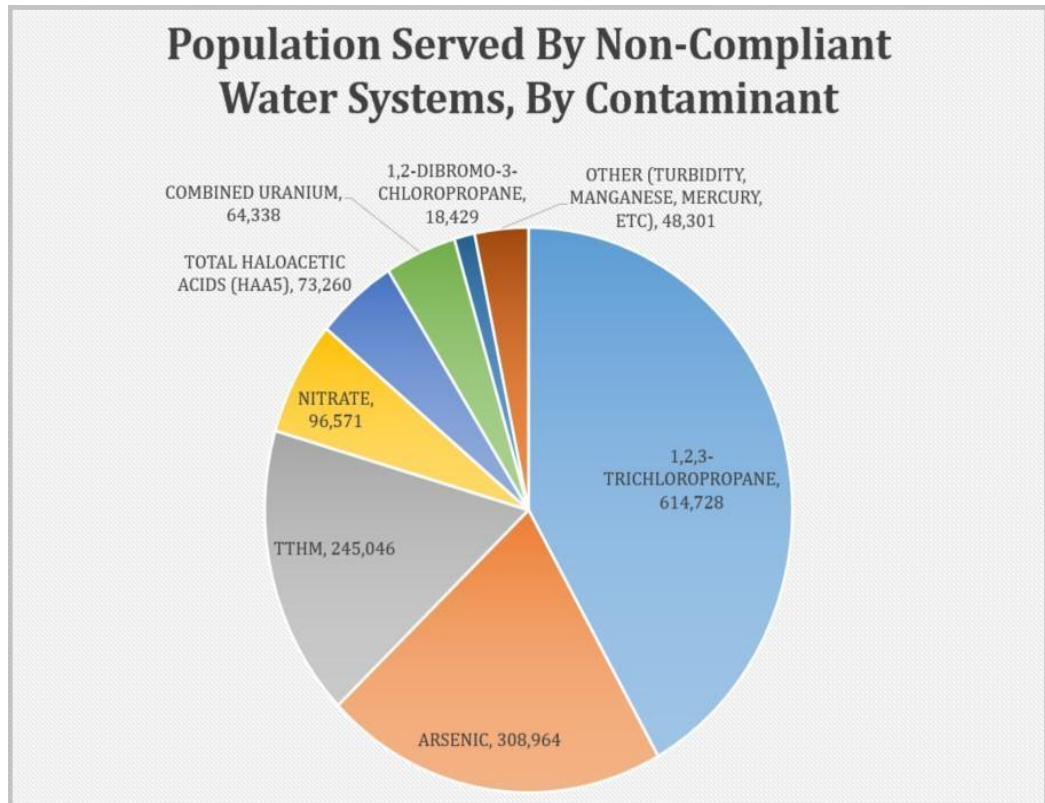
Many disadvantaged communities, especially unincorporated ones, grapple with air pollution, too, and a lack of infrastructure. And with no city government, it falls on these water boards—the only locally elected officials—to take control. “This is really a question of democracy, grassroots democracy, to be able to have people in the community making decisions about the issues that affect them,” he says.



Eva Dominguez is a project manager with Self-Help-Enterprises who designed this year’s leadership institute.

The people in this room understand that. And for some, like Jim Maciel in Armona, it’s a calling. “It’s a good way that I can use some of my talents to help other people,” he says. “And it’s really sort of a labor of love.”

It’s actually his second year taking the leadership institute. He appreciated the first one so much, that this time, he brought along two of his fellow board members.



Includes data from 3,297 public water systems in California. Disclaimer from State Water Resources Control Board: Total population served by non-compliant water systems may be lower than represented here, because a water system may be out of compliance for more than one contaminant.