

SACRAMENTO BEE

Clean water is a fight for many Californians. Will Newsom's law fix the waiting game?

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Link to Video: <https://www.sacbee.com/news/california/article235680992.html>

Water is scarce and dirty for many in Fresno County's small West Park community.

They're not alone. It's a common and persistent challenge for residents throughout California who rely on water wells.

Residents in West Park, an unincorporated cluster of houses and buildings on the southwestern outskirts of Fresno, say they have stopped drinking the water altogether. The water's trace amounts of uranium and nitrates cause them to shut their eyes and mouths as tightly as possible when showering.

As the state focuses on providing clean and affordable drinking water for millions of residents, those on private wells typically face an uphill battle.

Private well owners confront significant financial challenges digging new wells and connecting to a public water system includes a daunting bureaucratic process that frequently includes months of waiting and no guarantees projects will get approved.

"The contamination is not the fault of the residents. It's a result of a number of things," said Mariah Thompson, staff attorney for California Rural Legal Assistance. She has worked with the West Park residents on private wells. "We shouldn't refuse to invest in these communities just because they're small."

Brothers Ricardo and Amadaor Valenzuela are part of a group of about a dozen West Park homes hoping to connect to the City of Fresno's water system.

A single well supplies water to three homes on a piece of land the brothers share - and the well is drying up.

Such worries are common in hundreds of tiny unincorporated communities up and down California. Reliable data on private wells are hard to come by and typically provide only a glimpse at an incomplete picture. In Fresno County, more than 19,000 permits have been issued for private wells since 1976 and officials estimate up to one million wells have been recorded statewide since 1950. However, it's hard to know how many of those wells still work or whether the water is any good.

The recent signing of the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, SB200, by Gov. Gavin Newsom gave new hope to many seeking to tie their homes to larger systems. Others, however, already are gearing up for costly challenges as some communities resist taking on additional water users.

'WE ARE IN A FIGHT'

The painstaking struggles faced by well owners are familiar to Amador and Ricardo Valenzuela, the two brothers who live in the West Park community.

The brothers said they have lost confidence in their water well as have deepen their well in recent years only for lab tests to show it isn't safe to drink.

"The water in the well is running out. We have limited water," Ricardo Valenzuela said.

The 62-year-old West Park man said he spends \$40 on drinking water a month to avoid having his family drink the dirty water.

Not long ago, Amador Valenzuela's wife died of cancer. He fears the water may have hurt his wife, but he can't be certain.

"When she'd come out of the shower, her skin would get red spots, lots of rashes," Amador said. "She struggled a lot with the water."

At the height of the state's most recent drought, residents banded together, raising about \$8,000 to pay for a preliminary study needed to connect Fresno's water system. The report was critical to be considered for project funding as part of an emergency drought assistance program from the United States Department of Agriculture.

But, according to the residents, by the time an engineer completed the study, the USDA had changed its requirements for the grant. The state grant money went elsewhere, they said.

With no other options, the frustrated residents started over.

"We are in a fight," Ricardo Valenzuela said.

SOLUTIONS IN SIGHT?

At a bill signing event in eastern Fresno County, Newsom said he wants to consolidate some of the state's roughly 7,000 water systems, a solution that would force larger water systems to help smaller struggling ones.

But already there are signs of testy consolidation challenges ahead that officials say will determine how the law moves forward.



In Tulare County, Exeter and Tooleville are at a crossroads over their water issues. Exeter's refusal earlier this year to connect Tooleville to its water system laid the groundwork for a lengthy legal battle. Tooleville residents have faced numerous stumbling blocks for many years despite their organized efforts.

On the other hand, individual private well owners often don't even have the coordination needed to manage the state's grueling bureaucratic process. Many require help from outside organizations familiar with negotiating the state's process. Additionally, The Environmental Protection Agency and state water agencies are not mandated to test private wells, leaving that to the owners.

The Valenzuelas said they only learned their water was not clean after workers with Self Help Enterprises and California Rural Legal Assistance pulled water samples and had them tested.

"If we weren't told, we'd probably be drinking the water, without knowing the danger," Ricardo Valenzuela said.

West Park residents cleared a major hurdle in October when the Fresno County Board of Supervisors submitted a water project proposal to the state on the community's behalf.

If approved, an initial phase would bring in the Fresno Local Agency Formation Commission to redraw West Park's boundaries in the County Served Area map to annex the dozen or so homes urgently searching for clean water. The second phase includes connecting the newly-added homes on the City of Fresno's water lines.

The plan could cost about half a million dollars - money West Park residents say they simply don't have. Fresno County would fund the project and receive reimbursement from the state, according to Bryan Potter, State Water Resources Board Tulare District Engineer.

"I know these residents are very eager to be connected," said Sara Luquin, community development specialist with Self Help Enterprises. She has also worked with West Park residents. "It takes a lot of work, as we are discovering."

Even with the potential new funding and political will from Sacramento, residents in West Park still face an uncertain future. It's expected to take eight to 10 months to hear back from the State Water Resources Board on whether the project is even feasible.

Still, residents hope Newsom's drinking water fund will help speed up the process as the state expects to invest about \$130 million annually until 2030 on water consolidation and management projects. The law's process is still being developed.

"Any funding that is made for water systems is more money than we had a day before," Potter said. "Is it enough? We'll find out."

This article is part of The California Divide, a collaboration among newsrooms examining income inequity and economic survival in California.

