

THE FERN

Coronavirus forces California farmworkers to scramble for safe drinking water

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By: Liza Gross

With stores rationing bottled water, some 1 million residents whose tap water is tainted with agricultural pollutants confront the state's failure to solve the problem

Bare shelves in grocery stores have become a fact of life during the coronavirus crisis, as panicked shoppers worried about shortages resort to hoarding. Yet what's little more than an inconvenience for most people could pose serious health risks for as many as a million Californians living in poor rural farmworker communities with tap water fouled by decades of agricultural pollution.



The crisis has revealed the inadequacy of state programs designed to get safe and affordable drinking water to these communities, leaving organizers scrambling to make sure residents have enough clean water for their families.

California has known about the tainted tap water for decades, but efforts to solve the problem have been piecemeal. Last year, the state passed a law to supplement existing programs and guarantee long-term funding for water system infrastructure and regular bottled water deliveries for communities with water systems containing nitrate and other contaminants, which have been linked to cancer and other health problems. But funds for the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience Program (SAFER) — which doesn't cover every community with tainted water — won't be available until July. And, more importantly, many communities will still be left out.

For the past several years communities have relied on grants and emergency funds to get clean water delivered to homes in need. But advocates say the deliveries often aren't enough for many families — and that was before everyone ramped up handwashing to protect against the virus, and before the hoarding of bottled water began.

"That's when we saw a huge crisis," says Tami McVay, manager of emergency services for Self-Help Enterprises, a community development organization that oversees state-funded water deliveries in the San Joaquin Valley. Even if people wanted to go buy their own water, they couldn't. Meanwhile, vendors who delivered bottled water were short-staffed because drivers didn't want to risk exposure to the coronavirus, leaving many residents without water.

Lucy Hernandez, who lives in West Goshen, a tiny farming town in the San Joaquin Valley, couldn't even find enough bottled water in nearby Visalia, one of the biggest cities in the valley, for her family and friends with contaminated water.

"I'm doing the census here in the community and everybody is telling me the same thing," Hernandez says. "They can't find water in the stores and a lot of people can't even find food."

This crisis spotlights the fact that the state simply hasn't done enough to help people without safe tap water, says Michael Claiborne, senior attorney with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, a nonprofit that's helping get water to farmworker communities in central and southeastern California.

People living in these communities are among the state's most vulnerable residents. Many work in the same fields that polluted their wells, and come home to long-neglected towns without the basic water infrastructure needed to clean it up.

As Claiborne says, they're trying "to fix a problem that shouldn't have been there in the first place."

A history of neglect

Nitrate is one of California's most widespread groundwater contaminants, and the state has struggled with the problem for decades. But the true scope and cause of the contamination was first revealed in 2012 by researchers at the University of California, Davis, who concluded that agriculture accounts for 96 percent of the problem. (Read FERN's story on the report.)

Since then, state officials have chipped away at the problem with bonds and bills to fund community projects and direct consolidation of water systems. But the measures have never matched the scope of the problem or reached all the affected communities. In an attempt to fill in gaps, the state allocated \$130 million a year through SAFER to underwrite water deliveries until long-term improvements and infrastructure can be made.



Bottles of tap water from communities in California's Central Valley, with levels of contaminants listed.

Resolving decades of neglect and contamination in these isolated communities is a major undertaking that state officials are still trying to get a handle on. "SAFER was a step forward but there are obstacles hurtling at us at the speed of light that are more political than logistical," says Julie Macedo, staff counsel at the State Water Resources Control Board.

California has a polluter-pays policy, so if there's an oil spill off the coast, for example, the oil company is required to clean it up. Yet even though agriculture accounts for nearly all the nitrate discharge, she says, "We don't make the farmers clean it up, because farming has a really strong lobby." Cleaning up the contamination is "going to be very, very expensive," Macedo says. "It's a 50- to 100-year problem."

And, Michael Claiborne notes, as one system is fixed more go out of compliance. "It's hard to get ahead."

The California Farm Bureau Federation did not respond to a request for comment.

People with unsafe tap water rely on bottled water for everything, even brushing their teeth, Claiborne says, so it's critical for them to find adequate bottled water supplies. He's especially worried about people in Pixley, a San Joaquin Valley town long plagued by unsafe arsenic levels in its water. Arsenic, a known carcinogen, occurs naturally in the soil and groundwater in this region. Utilities can either build filtration systems to remove it or dig new wells to find clean water. Both options are too costly for towns like Pixley. One grandmother Claiborne knows had to drive more than 20 miles to find bottled water because all the stores in the town of 3,000 were sold out, putting herself at risk of contracting the virus and forcing her to spend more money on gas.

Those who can't find bottled water at stores have been going to drinking-water kiosks, vending machines where they can fill 5-gallon jugs. The kiosks are maintained as part of a settlement agreement between the state's water board and agricultural interests to help communities affected by nitrate-contaminated groundwater. But there aren't kiosks in every town, Claiborne says, "which means that people are spending more time out driving and looking for options they're not used to using."

Even worse, Claiborne was distressed to hear that people were using a kiosk that was connected to Pixley's system. He thinks they probably came from somewhere else and didn't know the water contains arsenic. "That's one reason we pushed so hard for an executive order on water shutoffs," he says. "So we don't hear any more stories like that."