

THE FRESNO BEE

Old racist policies keep hurting these Fresno-area families. Will this make things safer?

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By: Cresencio Rodriguez-Delgado

When the cap of a propane tank blew off and sent fumes into the air four years ago, Melynda Metheney didn't know what to do. She feared her mother-in-law's home in West Goshen, east of Visalia, could blow up due to the gas spill.

Firefighters helped them avoid an explosion, but Metheney's mother-in-law, Lucy Hernandez, was saddled with the cost of replacing the propane.

It's a reality that most face in West Goshen because the community isn't connected to the state's gas pipelines. On top of that, the homes rely on swamp coolers that begin to fail when temperatures reach over 100 degrees. Propane and wood are used for cooking and showers.

"I know that it's bad for the environment, and I know it's something that I don't want to do, but it's like we don't have a choice," Hernandez said. "We don't want to contaminate the air, but we can't afford to warm up our homes."

West Goshen is far from alone.

In California, around 170 communities face similar challenges with the outdated and costly energy source, according to estimates by the California Public Utilities Commission.

POWERING UP RURAL VALLEY COMMUNITIES

Ten small communities in the central San Joaquin Valley were selected by the California Public Utilities Commission for an affordable energy project to replace wood and propane with electricity.

The CPUC identified the communities as disadvantaged not just because they lack natural gas infrastructure but also because many residents are low-income, and pollution is high.

But the CPUC is aiming to help change life for thousands of residents who make up these communities. In 2017, it began examining the possibility of connecting homes in 10 of the disadvantaged communities to affordable electric energy, including solar power. The goal is to reduce about 40% of energy costs for residents and transition them to cleaner fuel.

The \$56 million pilot project includes communities like West Goshen, Allensworth, Cantua Creek, Ducor, Lanare, and Seville, among others.

WILL ENERGY COSTS BE CHEAPER FOR RURAL SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY?

As California witnesses extreme heat and wildfires, transitioning the communities to clean, affordable energy could be a positive step in the slow shift toward renewable energy in California.

Residents hope it leads to healthier lives — and helps reverse a legacy of disinvestment in rural Black and Latino communities.

This summer, community groups began sending out applications to residents for free home assessments for the program, which offers up to \$5,000 for home repairs.

Abigail Solis, a sustainable energy solutions manager with Self Help Enterprises, said the pilot project would analyze data so the CPUC can determine whether the program works.

Residents were promised incentives like energy discounts and protection from rising utility bills.

“The last thing we want is for somebody to participate in this program and their bills go up. We promised them cost-savings, and we intend to deliver on that. But we know it can’t happen without education,” Solis said.

Typically, a household will pay \$1,200 a year to fill up a propane tank, according to estimates gathered by Solis and Self-Help. But the cost of running homes with propane is often higher, according to data that the Southern California Gas Company provided to the CPUC in the project’s early stages. It estimated that residents in communities like Lanare face a cost of around \$2,484 annually.

Older residents on fixed incomes and those with children often struggle to afford it, according to Hernandez, of West Goshen.

“Everybody is looking out to save money,” Hernandez said. “We want to be able to afford other stuff that we need for our children instead of paying to the Edison Company or spending it on propane.”

Leslie Martinez, a policy advocate with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability who has worked on the project in Fresno County, said propane is loosely regulated.

“(Propane companies) are not beholden to anyone but the market,” Martinez said. “If they know there’s a demand, they’re going to raise their prices.”

‘REDLINING’ STILL HURTS FRESNO-AREA COMMUNITIES TODAY

In West Goshen, residents petitioned the utility company for decades to extend the gas line that stops about two miles east of the community.



Abigail Solis, a sustainable energy solutions manager with Self Help Enterprises, helps San Joaquin Valley communities during a state pilot project aimed at transitioning communities to cleaner energy.



Melynda Metheney, who lives in West Goshen, is one of many residents in the San Joaquin Valley who are undergoing a pilot project to test electric energy in their homes. The communities chosen for the project have relied on wood and propane.

But the residents were told there were not enough paying customers in the community to make the project possible, according to Hernandez and Solis.

For those who study the history of energy, this represents the historical legacy of redlining, which is the systematic denial of services that often traces back to racist governing and policies. Many of the communities that have lacked adequate energy have been Black and Latino communities.

“Energy is a racial justice issue. It has such a racialized history,” said Carmelita Miller, energy equity legal counsel for the Greenlining Institute. She said the state’s most neglected residents should be at the forefront of the move toward renewable energy.



ABIGAIL SOLIS, A SUSTAINABLE ENERGY SOLUTIONS MANAGER WITH SELF HELP ENTERPRISES, ASSISTS LUCY HERNANDEZ, A WEST GOSHEN RESIDENT, WITH APPLICATIONS FOR A PILOT PROJECT AIMED AT BRINGING ELECTRIC ENERGY TO DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES IN THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY.

Metheney said West Goshen residents have adapted for many years.

In the past, they have heard the question that many residents in small communities get: why don’t they move?

But Metheney argues it’s not so easy. Moving won’t change the situation for places like West Goshen, she says. Besides, residents have long lived in the small, secluded community.

“You hear about Silicon Valley, and you hear about all these great things that are happening, and it’s pretty to look at. I know it’s not pretty to look at here, but there are beautiful people here,” Metheney said.