

THE FRESNO BEE

This Madera County community is running out of water — and the only well might fail

August 18, 2020

By: Monica Vaughan

Residents of Fairmead, California worry they are on the brink of losing water service, as the town's only community well shows signs it may fail before a new one can be built.

After years of planning, the Madera County Board of Supervisors on Aug. 11 approved an engineering contract to design and manage upgrades to the system, including a new well to serve more than 500 people connected to the community water system.

Construction won't likely begin until 2021. Norma Bustillos, a longtime Fairmead resident, worries that will be too late.

"It's kind of scary, you know? One of these days, we're going to wake up and there's not going to be water," Bustillos told The Fresno Bee. She knows life without water service; years ago, the system was down for three days: no showers, no laundry, and portable toilets.

She has reason to worry.

More than a dozen private wells in Fairmead have gone dry in the last two to three years, according to the organization Self-Help Enterprises, which provides emergency interim water there.

In July, residents on the community well were ordered to stop watering outside — a stage 4 water restriction meant to reduce demand on the well after the pump was drawing down and sucking up air. Bustillos says her water is cloudy like there is too much air in it. That could mean the water level is dropping below the level of the pump, or there is extra air in the water for other reasons.

Maria Enriquez, across town, has seen problems with her tap water, too.

In early August, she said, foamy and brown water spurted from her faucet. Cell phone photos taken by Enriquez's grandchild of the water in pots were shared on social media. She said the water has been "undrinkable" for a while but she still pays \$66 a month to Madera County for water service.

"They're just telling me it's air because the pump is slow and it's throwing bubbles and air. The water comes out milky or starchy," Enriquez said, though it has more recently become clearer.

Water advocates with the Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability and Self-Help Enterprises have expressed concern that private wells in Madera County are going dry this summer, and urged county supervisors to expedite construction to protect Fairmead's drinking water.

"Folks [in Fairmead], they're getting on the end of their water supply, and it's not looking very good for them," said Eddie Ocamp of Self-Help Enterprises.

If the well fails, the county can turn on a test well for emergency supply, but it's unclear how much water that can provide. It was drilled by the state to test water quality for the new well. It is not constructed to be a permanent water source and may have insufficient yield.

"We are trying to push forward knowing the community is on stage 4," said Andrea Saldate, deputy director of county Public Works. "We are asking that the community adhere to that stage 4 and to eliminate all outdoor water use so that way we can keep them in water."

Approval of the engineering contract came eight months after the county was awarded funds needed from the state to finance the project, a delay that Saldate said was a result of COVID-19.

"It's a little discouraging to see the whole time the county had this funding for this well," said Madeline Harris, policy advocate with Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability.

"This well is going to go dry during a pandemic," Harris said, and "it was completely preventable."

Matt Treber, community development director of county Public Works, told The Bee there is no indication the well will fail, and the main reason the well wasn't drilled earlier is because the state required the system to include installing meters as part of the project and the county had to expand the scope of the work.

He told supervisors that "obviously the Fairmead water system is a concern and it's a priority," but said for the record that "their water is good, safe drinking water."

He and other county employees, including deputy director of Public Works Phillip Toler, denied the photos of foamy, brown water came from the Fairmead water system. It's possible that Enriquez's water issue is a result of localized problem.

"There is no water quality issue. There is a quantity issue," Toler said. "Based on the sheer amount of water they use, there's not enough."

DRY WELLS IN MADERA COUNTY

The situation is reminiscent of California's last severe drought, when private wells in Fairmead, like in many San Joaquin Valley communities, sucked up air when pumps could no longer reach declining groundwater levels.

Only this time, the region is in moderate drought and the problem seems particularly focused in Madera County.

More than 135 households in the county currently rely on emergency water tanks and water deliveries or bottled water since their private wells went dry in the last two or three years, according to Tami McVay with Self-Help Enterprises.

"This year, Madera (County) has been hit pretty hard and we are definitely doing more work in Madera than we have in the past," McVay said.

The organization recently took on the role of delivering emergency interim water to homes in Madera County after the county program ran out of money.

In the last month, 28 new households in the county enrolled in the program after their wells recently went dry, McVay told The Bee. And, the pump in a well in the new community of Riverstone failed

because of declining groundwater levels, according to the district engineer for Root Creek Water District.

Treber, the county community development director, told said that it is not uncommon to have domestic wells go dry and he's seen it his entire life living in foothill communities.

"Have I seen a proliferation of those in the last month? No. I've not seen a large influx of domestic wells going dry right now," Treber said in a phone interview.

Drinking water advocates like Harris with Leadership Counsel see it differently.

"Madera County has over-stressed their emergency water program probably more than any other county in the Valley," Harris said. "Clearly, that means Madera County really needs to reflect upon why that is the case and take different actions than they have been taking and stop this from happening."

There have been opportunities to reduce the demand on groundwater.



Norma Bustillos doesn't keep water in the family's backyard pool.

WET ORCHARDS IN MADERA COUNTY

When Fairmead's water crisis made national news in 2015, residents and analysts indicated almonds as another culprit aside from the drought.

The 165 Fairmead households on the community water well and hundreds of others in town on private wells all rely on groundwater. That means they all compete with water-intensive almond and pistachio orchards, and farmers who can pay to drill deeper wells.

A county analysis of new agriculture plantings suggests that "new agricultural lands are coming into production and there are shifts from lower- to higher-water using crops," a July 2020 staff report says.

Residents say they have felt the impacts of that change in land use.

"When they started putting almond orchards around the community, I was one of the first people to speak out about that project, but I wasn't heard," Bustillos told The Bee through a Spanish-language interpreter. "That's when all the problems started with the water."

The water pressure at her home has generally been low ever since, Bustillos said.

"We can't do two things at once. We can take the shower, or wash the dishes, or wash clothes. Thankfully there is still water coming out, but it's not like it used to be," Bustillos said.

"What's going to happen when there's no water? Can we still live here?" she asked.

While stories of dry wells made headlines, almond acreage continued to expand in Madera County.

The total harvested acreage of almonds in the county grew 77% in eight years from 80,000 acres in 2010 to 142,000 acres in 2018, according to the county's crop report. That's "harvested acreage," so the trees were likely planted a few years earlier.

Records show that even through the driest years in California's history from late 2011 to 2014, new almond orchards were planted in Madera County.

Over 3,300 acres of almonds were planted in the county in 2011, 3,600 acres in 2012, 4,300 acres in 2013, another 4,300 acres in 2014, and another 4,000 acres of almonds were planted in Madera County the year after that, according to the California Department of Food and Agriculture Almond Acreage Report.



Drip irrigation is used in an almond orchard, seen Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 12, 2020 in Fairmead.

That's paid off. The total value of almonds grown in Madera County grew by \$405 million between 2010 and 2018 to \$706 million, according to the county agriculture report.

Harris said county leaders "prioritize industry over people and the human right to water" and they continue to support "water-intensive cash crops that make no sense to grow in an area with depleting water sources."

Supervisors recently discussed ways to manage and reduce the demand on groundwater, although action has not been taken.

At a July 21 meeting, supervisors heard a presentation about how land in the county has been converted to more water-intensive crops ,and then discussed the potential to regulate groundwater use allocations or using county zoning authority to control how much land goes into agricultural production.

HOPE FOR A NEW WELL

That the well might go dry should not be a surprise.

Residents have told public officials for years that the "well isn't producing like it used to" and "wells are running dry now." And, they requested a second well to help keep a storage tank full for emergency backup supplies. Those concerns are documented in the county regional water plan published in 2014.

That same year, the county was awarded a planning funding agreement for a new well from the state Department of Public Health, according to a staff report. Then the county worked with the State Water Resources Control Board to apply for additional funding to install water meters throughout the system to meet an upcoming state requirement.

The final funding needed was awarded in December 2019 from voter-supported Clean Water and Parks Act. The new well and metering system will be entirely funded through state grants.

Resources, in general, are slow coming to Fairmead.

It's an unincorporated community where 30% of people live below the poverty line. There is no sewer system or sidewalks.

Though demographics have shifted, it has always been a community of color.

Within Yokuts territory, the land was founded as Fairmead in the early 1900s as a Black colony in response to white-only policies in nearby Chowchilla. African-American families found home there during the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl. Some got work in cotton fields and others started family farms on 5-acre parcels.

Now the community is about 70% Latino and 7% Black, according to census data.

Enriquez's family made the town their home when she was a child in the early 1970s. She remembers a lot of orange trees, a dairy, and maybe one almond orchard.

At the time, "there were only Black people here and we were the only Mexicans in town," she said. "We like it; that's why we stayed."

She's lived in town for most of her life and worked for many years. Now, she depends on a Social Security check for disability, and money is tight.

"I love paying my bills on time. But what I get, it's either pay all my bills or have food on my table," she said. "They can't give us a break, even if we can't drink the water?"

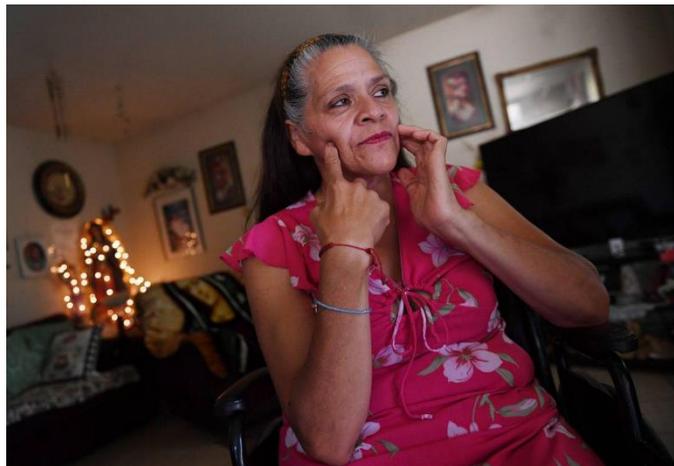
These days, she drinks and cooks with only bottled water, an added expense. She stopped drinking the tap water a few months ago when the water came out "real muddy," she said. It was reddish and it stained her toilet and shower. The next day, it was clear but milky.

Low income communities outside city limits, like Fairmead, often have insufficient infrastructure and are more likely to lack access to safe and affordable drinking water, according to an analysis of San Joaquin Valley published by the UC Davis Center for Regional Change in 2018.

Many residents in disadvantaged unincorporated communities in the Valley "pay a triple penalty to obtain safe water," the report says. "They bear the health costs of unsafe drinking water; they purchase that unsafe water at high costs; and they must also purchase 'substitute' water — typically expensive bottled water — for drinking and cooking purposes."

"I think everyone is dealing with these issues because I talk with my neighbors about how we're all running out of water," Bustillos said.

"It would be good for (the county) to act now and be prepared to connect us to a different well so we don't run out of water. This is water, and water is an indispensable human right."



Maria Enriquez talks about the cloudy water she has endured from her home's tap water Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 12, 2020 in Fairmead. The water wells of Fairmead, many of them privately owned, are drying up. The County of Madera plans to build a new well, but it may not be finished until 2021.