

THE SUN-GAZETTE

Tooleville water board can't tap answers with drought looming

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Community dependent on state water deliveries stagnant on solutions, haven't met in over a year due to COVID-19

TOOLEVILLE – Maria Olivera is worried about the drought.

As the secretary of the Tooleville Nonprofit Mutual Water Association, Olivera usually hosts the group's meetings in her backyard, where board members govern over the unincorporated area of under 400 people's water system, rendered non-potable from pesticides and contaminants. Olivera and the board are in a worrisome situation after not meeting for over a year while hunkered down due to COVID-19, with their water still undrinkable and a historic drought at their doorstep.

"I'm afraid to run out of water," Olivera said, who's lived in the small, rural town east of Exeter since 1974, recalling years past seeing her water meter at just about zero. "This is really going to be a bad year again."

If having undrinkable water wasn't bad enough, Olivera's fear of Tooleville's wells running dry is even worse. Jessi Snyder, community development director at nonprofit Self Help Enterprises—who's team works with Olivera and the board in Tooleville—said Olivera's fear is a legitimate concern.

"She is right to be concerned, for sure," Snyder said. "The impact of losing one or both of their wells is they would not have water for all of the things you use water for besides drinking—cooking, hygiene, flushing toilets. But in many, many cases it is also cooling."

Snyder said many Tooleville residents use rooftop evaporative coolers, which require a certain level of water pressure in the system to actually get the water up to the cooler. She recalled many instances in the past of low water pressure due to pump failures.

"People have to climb up there with buckets to fill their swamp coolers, which is not a pretty picture for [someone who is] elderly or disabled in any way," Snyder said.

Many of the county's cooling centers are miles away in Visalia. Minimal infrastructure and public transportation to and from the unincorporated town, the Summer's sweltering triple digit temperatures, dry wells or pressure problems and no air conditioning could create a dangerous public health hazard.

Olivera said she hopes the board can meet in the next few weeks, where they can begin to catch up on the myriad water issues that face Tooleville's residents, chief among them consolidating their water system with their neighbor city Exeter, an effort that has failed in the past.

"We need to start again, fighting to connect to the city," Olivera said. "So that's what we've been trying. Nobody helps."

Olivera had the opportunity to serve on an advisory committee for the state's Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, but she said the state has yet to help solve their water problems in Tooleville other than shipping out bottled water.

The Tooleville Nonprofit Mutual Water Association will meet in the coming weeks followed by continued reporting from The Sun-Gazette.