

State seeking help with outreach for water issues in rural valley communities

By: Jesse Vad SJV Water

Date: March 6, 2022

If you know your way around poor, rural communities with bad drinking water in the San Joaquin Valley, the state needs your help.

A highly anticipated \$130 million annual program to fix bad drinking water systems in disadvantaged communities has sputtered getting off the ground because the state can't seem to connect with residents.

So, now it's looking to hire people to get out and spread the word.

The state has money and programs to fix domestic wells, wrote Jessi Snyder, director of community development for Self-Help Enterprises, in an email.

"The hard part has been getting the word out about those resources," Snyder wrote. Self-Help is a Visalia-based nonprofit that works with disadvantaged communities throughout the valley on affordable housing and drinking water issues.

And there are plenty of drinking water problems in small, isolated valley communities, which is one of the reasons the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) program was created in 2019 and assigned an annual \$130 million budget.

But the state has faced myriad problems getting those resources into the hands of the residents who need them.

A lack of technology and reliable internet in some communities make it difficult for residents to attend meetings and communicate with the State Water Resources Control Board, which oversees SAFER, according to a report on the new outreach effort to hire community liaisons.

Another challenge has been poor communication. Projects can often take years to complete and communication with project managers often deteriorates.

And there've been cultural and language rifts as well, according to the new outreach plan, which noted water education hasn't been done in communities' preferred method of communication. The new outreach effort will use community partners to engage residents and explain how programs from free bottled water to new wells will work, what to expect and how to stay involved and informed.

And technical assistance partners will provide everything from administrative to operational help.

The Water Board is also using an aquifer risk map to help target communities with the greatest need for safe drinking water. The map estimates where domestic wells and state small water systems will likely be pumping from contaminated aquifers.

The board is still looking for partners and anticipates finalizing agreements by late 2022.

Meanwhile, Snyder said residents in the San Joaquin Valley with dry domestic wells or who wish to get water quality testing can call Self-Help Enterprises at 559-802-1685 for assistance. Self-Help Enterprises can set up bottled water deliveries, water hauling, well assessments, water quality testing and water tank installations.

Residents can also visit www.mywellwentdry.org for a list of resources by county.