

Exclusive: Residents in this small Tulare County town had no water this week

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TOOLEVILLE, Calif. (KSEE/KGPE) - A small Tulare County community continues fighting for access to drinking water. This week, one of Tooleville's two wells nearly went dry.

"There was no water," said Maria Olivera, who is secretary for the Tooleville Mutual Non-profit Water Association. "If you put soap in your hands, you feel like you're going to stay with the soap in your hands. People that got home from work late, they couldn't shower."

Olivera said they lost most of their water on Monday and Tuesday. Service was restored on Wednesday after crews lowered the pump another 25 feet to get water.

The two-block town had the same problem last summer when one of its two wells went dry.

"That happened because the water levels dropped below where the pump is located," explained Andrea Galdamez with Self-Help Enterprises, one of the organizations helping residents with the ongoing water struggle. "We've been using a lot of groundwater, and there's only so much groundwater that there's available because we don't get a lot of rain in this area."

"As of yesterday, it was operating every three to four minutes and then shutting down," said Michael Claiborne, a directing attorney at Leadership Counsel for Justice and Accountability, another organization working with families to get them safe, drinking water.

For now, families rely on bottled water deliveries through a state program.

The Tulare County community has had toxic tap water for 40 years. Tooleville wants to consolidate its water system with the neighboring City of Exeter.

After the water outage last year, the State stepped in and gave both communities a six-month deadline to come up with a solution. The deadline expired in February and there is still no agreement.

"It's very disappointing because we really need that water. We're not going to be like this every year," said Olivera.

Claiborne said he hopes they can reach an official deal by July 21st. After an agreement, though, the water system consolidation process could take eight years.

After this week's emergency, Claiborne wants to ask the state about fast-tracking portions of the consolidation.

"In an emergency like this, a lot of the requirements for environmental review don't apply," he said, adding that if the request is approved, an interconnection to Exeter could take about six months.

"We need this done soon," said Olivera.