

SJV WATER

Even emergency water suppliers are close to tapped out as more valley towns go dry

July 19, 2022
By: Jesse Vad



Tulare County, in red, is in the heart of California's San Joaquin Valley where water tables are plummeting, drying up domestic wells, in the drought as farmers pump more to irrigate crops. SOURCE WIKIPEDIA

Groundwater levels are dropping and domestic wells throughout the San Joaquin Valley are going dry as California's third year of drought grinds on.

That includes entire towns, such as East Oroshi and Tooleville in Tulare County, which both went dry last week.

It's bad. But it may get worse.

Area water suppliers are "locking down" and may not have enough to share, equipment is in short supply and so are people to get the water to those in need.

And there's still a long stretch of summer to go.

"I'm concerned about a lot," said Tami McVay, assistant program director for Self-Help Enterprises, a Visalia-based nonprofit that helps poor, rural residents with housing and water needs.

Self-Help responds to water crises in small communities with water storage tanks and hauling in water from other regulated water systems.

But those other systems are strapped too and "locking down" supplies, McVay said.

"We had numerous water sources where we could pull water from to take to homes and we do not have those anymore," said McVay. "Folks are saying, 'yeah, we're worried about our communities and people that we serve, so we have to be careful.'"

Staff at Self-Help are meeting with officials from the state Water Resources Control Board and other agencies and have developed a Plan B in case hauled water sources disappear completely. McVay could not discuss the details of that plan yet.

She said this may only be the third year of drought but it's far worse than previous droughts with calls about dry wells coming as early as February this year.

By late May, the organization had a 300% increase in dry well calls compared to the same time last year, McVay said.

Just within the last month, 100 domestic wells have gone dry in the valley according to the state's dry well reporting system. That number is likely low since it only shows dry wells that have been officially reported.

Assuming water suppliers have enough to share, Tulare County officials worried there may not be enough trucks or drivers to get it to communities that go dry, said Denise England, grants and resources manager for Tulare County.

"The biggest challenge is there's only so many trucks on the road, and so the hauling capacity is what we're kind of bumping up against right now," she said.

Many rural valley residents rely on swamp coolers. With the valley's long run of 100-plus-degree days, not having water for swamp coolers is a concern, said England. County staff are working to set up public cooling centers in these far-flung communities.

That includes Seville, about 15 miles northeast of Visalia, where plummeting groundwater levels have left only a trickle for the town's wells. The 500-resident town isn't dry yet, but it's teetering.

"We're really just afraid that we're going to lose it completely. And at that point, we're not sure what we'll do," said Celeste Perez, general manager of the Yetttem-Seville Community Services District. Normally the wells produce between 110-120 gallons per minute but are down to just 55 gallons per minute.

Anticipating that things could get worse, the town contacted Self-Help, which arranged for 15,000 gallons of water to be hauled to the town.

They are hoping for more, if needed, and meanwhile aren't allowing any outdoor watering for the rest of summer.

Seville didn't face any of these issues last year, said Perez.