

VALLEY VOICE

South Valley in water crisis as systems fail

August 4, 2022

By: Dave Adalian

Small Valley communities are drying up.

The latest town to find itself waterless is Tooleville, east of Exeter on Highway 65.

In the middle of July, with temperatures soaring and the intense Valley summer in full swing, residents of the town found the well they rely on was delivering just a dribble where it was working at all. With the aid of Self-Help Enterprises, the town is now dependent on a pair of water tanks and costly daily deliveries of trucked-in water.

Tooleville is the second community in Tulare County to lose its water this summer. East Orosi was without water for 24 hours when a pump failed. The community lost a home that burned while the hydrants were dry.

Tooleville and East Orosi aren't the only communities here facing major water problems, both from shrinking groundwater supplies that are drying up shallow wells and from contaminants from decades of farming and ranching. At risk are water systems in West Goshen, East Porterville, Kettleman City and Tonyville, another small community southeast of Tooleville.

State's Worst Megadrought

California is in the midst of the worst period of sustained drought to hit the region since the late-1500s. A study in the journal *Nature*, however, says the situation is even worse than it appears. Researchers working with institutions such as the University of California and NASA found the years from 2000 to 2021 represent the driest 22-year period in the Western US since the year 800 A.D.

And because the drought is still with us in 2022, the current dry spell matches the length of the megadrought of the 1500s.

Some relief might be coming. A strong and persistent two-year-old La Niña – a weather pattern that keeps California and the surrounding states, as well as Mexico, starved for water when the Pacific Ocean cools in equatorial regions – appears to be weakening. However, forecasters say the condition is likely to persist through the end of the year, and there's no guarantee 2023 will bring a complete end to drought conditions.

At present, the majority of the South Central Valley – the hardest hit region in the state – is under “exceptional” drought conditions, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center, a federally funded monitoring program. The hardest hit areas include most of Tulare, Kings, Fresno, Kern, Madera and Mariposa counties. Surrounding counties are also affected, though not to the extent seen here.

The Immediate Crisis

The drought, bad as it is, is old news. What's new are the failures of water systems serving small, isolated rural communities, most of which also struggle with intense poverty. That's the case in

Tooleville, which has struggled for years to achieve a reliable water supply, and in East Oroquieta, where the community went dry when the town's only well was forced offline.

These problems have persisted for years and they have not gone unnoticed. A handful of organizations are working to bring safe, reliable water to these affected areas, but the problem appears to be not only environmental. Politics are also involved, both past and present, says Ryan Jensen, community solutions manager for one of those water activist organizations, the Visalia-based Community Water Center.

"The reason that we're in the situation we are in the Central Valley is a century or more of policy choices," he said. "Decisions about water and access to water that are in many ways not governed by the state of California."

How water supplies are managed was purposely left to local authorities, resulting in a patchwork of small irrigation and water districts controlling access to water supplies, both on the surface and now underground thanks to recent changes in the law.

Because the majority of those irrigation and water districts are controlled by elected officials who come from agricultural backgrounds, there's been a disparity in how water is distributed, with the people who work the fields coming in second to the crops that grow in them.

"The bulk of impacts to communities comes back down to historical decisions that underinvested or turned a blind eye to community development, especially poor and rural communities," said Jensen. "There's been a lot of historical decisions made at the municipal level and county level that pushed marginal communities to the edge."

Why No Safe Water?

A partial success story for a scenario is the Matheny Tract near Tulare. That small community adjacent to the county's second-largest city had no reliable water until its system was linked to nearby Tulare's municipal water supply. The move only came after the state forced Tulare to make the linkage. The city had originally planned to make the connection of its own accord, the infrastructure and memorandums of understanding were in place, then an election changed the makeup of the city council, and the new group decided to leave the Matheny Tract dry.

The state Department of Water Resources (DWR) stepped in and forced the city's hand. Now, Matheny Tract just lacks adequate sewers.

Waterless areas like Tooleville and the Matheny Tract are created by existing inequalities and prejudices, Jensen says. Minority groups were often forced by convention to seek housing outside cities that would not allow them to buy or rent within their borders, and when it comes time for cities to extend their municipal utility services to surrounding communities, the poor ones are often shortchanged.

"If they've got limited water and can provide it to a wealthier community, that's a better tax base," Jensen said. "You end up with a series of pressures that create communities that don't have access to government."

No access to government often means inadequate access to basic services for the poorest residents.

Problems, Politics and Money

In Exeter, which has been ordered by the state to link its water system with Tooleville's, there's no political impediment to seeing the project through, even if Exeter was reluctant at first given its own set of water system woes. Instead, there's a financial problem. Not only will Exeter's city water system have to be extended by miles to reach Tooleville, that city already has technical problems of its own, with contamination in a mostly isolated well and an aging system in need of repair and upgrades.

Upgrading Exeter's water system and connecting it to Tooleville will cost around \$15 million, which the state will largely fund.

Another barrier to accessing safe water is contamination caused by years of pollution from farming runoff and pesticides. Generations of pollutants are spread throughout the Valley's soil, and mitigating it will take hundreds of years, thousands for some of the longer-lived poisons, timeframes much longer than a single human lifespan that will require many generations of work to solve.

Then there are other impacts from the drought. Kettleman City has struggled for years with wells contaminated with farming byproducts, and fought for access to surface water to provide for citizens' domestic needs. When they finally got that access, the drought meant the state had to renege on its promise of surface drinking water, leaving Kettleman City residents drinking, cooking and bathing with contaminated groundwater.

"That's the kind of thing we're dealing with," Jensen said.

Groundwater Wars

When it became clear the state meant to regulate groundwater – a late move considering all other states in the West had done so years earlier – the ag community was fast to react, and moved to place people friendly to their industries in control of local groundwater sustainability agencies (GSAs).

Under the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) the state has mandated that agencies that control access to groundwater must make provisions for drinking water for the communities that depend on it, but that hasn't happened in large part. Worse, the incestuous relationship between irrigation and water districts and GSAs, where the same officials who control the districts also control the GSAs, has meant agriculture has been placed before access to drinking water for many Valley residents, especially in marginalized areas.

"What they weren't thinking about were drinking water voices," Jensen said of GSAs as they submitted their conservation plans to the DWR. "Basically, the decision making structures have been catering to farmers."

The plans, almost all of which, especially in the Central Valley, have been rejected by the state, sent back to the GSAs for revisions to make them compliant with the law. Failure to mitigate the impact when pumping water away from wells supplying drinking water would leave many of the Valley's residents without water access in their homes.

"Regulations will leave thousands of domestic wells dry," Jensen said.

Some GSAs were defiant when told by the state they had to provide water for people to drink. The case of GSAs in the Kings River sub-basin stands out.

“All the GSAs tried to tell DWR we’re not going to do drinking water mitigation,” Jensen said. “DWR came back and said, ‘Yes, you are.’”

Mitigation plans were due in July, and GSAs that didn’t make the deadline are now on probation with the DWR, meaning the agency is taking control of those GSAs until they comply with the regulations. Should agencies for some reason fail to make adequate provisions for drinking water concerns, they could face long-term take over by the state.

“They’re certainly at risk,” Jensen said. “A lot of GSA [working on] revised plans have basically committed to coming up with a mitigation plan, but I will be curious to see if the commitment is enough for DWR.”

Years of Drought, Years of Problems

Besides the shrinking water supply caused by the drought, pumping water from the aquifer that underlies the San Joaquin Valley has other consequences. The ground is sinking. As water is pumped from wells, the ground it helped support collapses. Parts of the Valley on the west side have sunk dozens of feet over the years that the subsidence effect has been monitored.

Also, the megadrought has been punctuated by wetter spells that provided short-term relief, but the impact of those drier periods lingers after they’ve passed. In West Goshen, there are at least four wells that have run dry. Two of those ran dry during the last period of exceptional drought and were never recovered. Other wells in that area carry contamination.

Those contaminants are the product of primitive farming methods, and regulations now govern how those pollutants are handled, yet their effects linger decades after the practices that caused the contamination ended.

Agriculture is, of course, the main industry in this region, and its been given heavy support by the government to ensure critical food supplies are maintained. Part of that has been subsidies to cover the cost of water, and cheap water, Jensen says, has allowed ag interests to be sloppy with its custodianship.

“It’s seen as a cheap input,” Jensen said. “We make decisions on what’s profitable, not sustainable. We need to be smarter with the water we’ve got.”