

GV WIRE

Despite the Huge Water Year, Valley Wells Go Dry. Is Cannabis Growing to Blame?

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By: SJV Water



Residents in Tulare County's rural Tooleville have overtaxed the water system mostly to grow marijuana and ornamental plants, says the water operator. (Shutterstock)

The small town of Tooleville ran out of water and started receiving water hauled in by truck on Monday, June 5.

It's the first time the town has needed hauled water since October of 2022. Despite the historic snowpack and storms this year, groundwater levels in some areas are still low and wells are still going dry.

Tooleville, in rural Tulare County, has been plagued by water problems for decades. Its two community wells struggled to produce enough water on and off for years as surrounding farms had to pump more groundwater in the recent multi-year drought. Residents there are used to relying on hauled water that fills two storage tanks, which were installed by nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises.

The big issue for Tooleville this time around is overuse in combination with slow groundwater recharge.

Residents just haven't been conserving enough, said Ralph Gutiérrez, water operator for Tooleville.

“Everything got wet this year. And we were doing really well,” said Gutiérrez. “But I had warned them of the water conservation. As soon as we get into June and July, and I thought it’d be at least July, that we’re gonna have issues out there.”

Residents have been overtaxing the water system mostly to grow marijuana and ornamental plants — outdoor landscaping, said Gutiérrez.

“Potential causes are increased water usage by users (lack of conservation and compliance with outdoor watering restrictions) and decreased production by both wells,” wrote a spokesperson for the state Water Resources Control Board, in an email.

Other Valley Wells Dry Up

Tooleville isn’t the only place where valley residents are learning that abundant water doesn’t automatically equal flush groundwater wells. The state Department of Water Resources reported 21 dry wells in the past month alone in the San Joaquin Valley.

Places such as Tooleville, which have struggled with pumping enough water in the past and are not near water recharge projects, will likely still struggle to pump water now, said Thomas Harter, a professor at UC Davis who specializes in groundwater resources in agricultural areas. The heavy rains earlier in the season may have given a couple of extra weeks compared to when they went dry during drought years, but shallower domestic wells will still likely struggle, he said.

“The recharge that’s been occurring hasn’t occurred uniformly,” said Harter. “Recharge will take some time to work its way into the subsurface.”

Besides groundwater depletion, Tooleville has also faced water contaminated with a carcinogen called hexavalent chromium. Most people drink bottled water.

For the past 20 years or more, residents and advocates have been seeking to consolidate with nearby Exeter, which has a larger, more reliable water system.

City officials in Exeter resisted the idea until 2021 when the state forced the consolidation to start. An interim connection is underway but the full consolidation project won’t be complete for another eight years.