

SJV WATER

Who's in charge? Unanswered questions spark frustration as weeks of water disruption have dragged into months for residents of Springville

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A Springville resident asks a question during a town hall meeting with representatives of Del Oro Water Company. Flooding knocked out several of the community's wells and residents are frustrated they are paying full price for intermittent water that they can't drink. YOU TUBE SCREEN GRAB

Since the devastating floods of March 10, a community of about 1,000 people has been paying, on average, \$150 a month for undrinkable water that is only available intermittently.

So far, no government agencies have stepped up to take control of the situation, or give clear answers to residents.

Aside from wanting water, residents want to know – who's in charge here?

The small, upscale enclave of Springville, tucked into the foothills of Tulare County, has endured nearly five months of no water, or intermittent water, since flooding in March wiped out community wells. Residents' frustration is mounting as the Del Oro Water Company has charged regular water rates for, at best, irregular service during those months.

Residents are calling the situation unjust and abusive and are wondering how Del Oro, a private for-profit water company, can continue charging them for water they can't drink and often can't access.

On March 10, floods destroyed six community wells operated by Del Oro, knocking out water service completely at first, according to a news release from Del Oro. Three of those wells have been abandoned and three are expected to come back online in the coming weeks.

On March 13, Del Oro started sending bottled water to its Springville customers. And on March 23, it began providing irrigation water to customers which can be used to wash clothes and shower but isn't safe to drink.

Del Oro has seven remaining wells in the area which were able to meet demand until June when usage went up. Since then, some residents have consistently lost access to water just about every day.

The company has blamed the intermittent lack of water on excessive use by customers. Staff have instituted a Stage 2 water conservation order aiming for a 20% overall reduction in water usage, a spokesperson told SJV Water via email.

Residents refute that saying it's impossible to overuse what they don't have as water has been completely shut off many evenings, according to Raffaella Woods, a Springville resident and Del Oro customer.

She said residents were understanding in the first weeks after the floods.

But when they started getting full water bills, many felt that was unfair, she said.

Customers pay a base rate of about \$150 per month regardless of water usage. About \$78 of that amount goes toward paying back a \$9 million state loan for a water treatment plant. That repayment amount will be lowered to about \$45 a month once the project is completed, wrote the spokesperson via email.

The treatment project was started in 2021 and is expected to be completed in November, according to a Del Oro spokesperson.

"The whole thing, it's a huge shock," said Woods. "The whole of Tulare County is flooding, we're underwater, the river is raging and yet we have no water."

More than 150 residents voiced their frustrations during a July 28 town hall meeting with several Del Oro representatives present. The company representatives said they've been trying to upgrade the Springville system over the last few years but have run into state red tape.

Woods and other residents have been trying to figure out which government agency they can appeal to about Del Oro's service. But answers about government responsibility have not been clear, according to residents.

"Ultimately, accountability is the final end goal," said Korey Wells, secretary for Springville's Chamber of Commerce board.

Wells isn't a Del Oro customer but he is helping the community through this process.

The California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) regulates private water companies such as Del Oro. Woods said she has gone back and forth with staff at the CPUC trying to get answers about why Del Oro is allowed to charge residents for water service for the past few months.

Answers have been scarce. Woods said a complaint against Del Oro was sent to the CPUC. But a CPUC spokesperson said staff have not seen a formal complaint.

When asked what responsibilities the CPUC has over private water companies, a spokesperson initially emailed SJV Water a link to the general CPUC website .

It took SJV Water almost two weeks to get a more clear definition of government roles in the Springville situation.

A spokesperson for the CPUC wrote in an email that the agency oversees construction, design, operation and maintenance of water and wastewater systems. It also regulates water utility rates and service by approving, denying, or modifying water utility requests, wrote the spokesperson.

In response to why Del Oro is allowed to charge full rates when there is little access to water, the spokesperson wrote, "while water access may have been hindered due to the flooding, Del Oro and its California Pines and River Island water systems were still operational. During this time the utility was working on providing alternate sources of water to customers, restoring water service and communicating updates to customers and regulatory agencies."

The agency's response was less than satisfactory for residents.

"The PUC should have been involved in this way, way sooner," said Wells. "And the fact that they haven't been is, I don't know how to describe it, but it's disappointing."

The CPUC said the state Water Resources Control Board is involved in the issue, but did not elaborate further.

The water board's Division of Drinking Water is working with Del Oro on conservation notices and other options to conserve water, wrote Adam Forbes, district engineer for Division of Drinking Water, in an email. But the division has no control over water rates, that's all between Del Oro and the CPUC, he added.

As for Tulare County, it has no responsibility over the system, said Denise England, grants and resources manager for the county. All responsibility falls on the water board and the CPUC, she said. A county supervisor has collected bottled water donations for Springville residents, but the county has no jurisdictional obligation there, England said.

"As far as the solution for the actual water company, that's really between the state and the water company," she said. "There's not really a role for the county to play there."

The lack of clear oversight has generated extreme frustration for residents.

On Friday, state senator Shannon Grove (R-Bakersfield) hosted a water distribution event in Springville to give bottled water to residents. Grove has called on the state to allow for nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises to provide temporary water tanks, plumbing to tie into Springville's service lines and about three million gallons of hauled water, according to a press release.

The state has provided grant funds for Self-Help to work with disadvantaged communities whose wells went dry during the drought.

For Springville residents, the entire saga has been months of stress.

Faith Gillis, a mother of three children ranging in age from one and a half to six years old, is concerned about her family's safety when it comes to the water. While her home has only experienced a slight drop in water pressure, watching her neighbors lose water access completely has been upsetting for her.

“If they’re okay and comfortable doing this to our neighbors, we’re next,” said Gillis.

On top of the ongoing issues, Del Oro is scheduled to raise its Springville customers’ rates by \$20 a month.

“We can’t afford it. Our water bill can easily get out of hand in a blink of an eye,” said Gillis. “We’re already paying these ungodly amounts.”