

# SJV WATER

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## Extreme heat straining water wells in Fresno, Madera counties. ‘Not a typical summer’

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Despite back-to-back good water years, domestic wells are still drying up all across the valley as record breaking heat waves pummel the region.

The state saw slightly above average runoff for the 2023-2024 water year with significant precipitation and major reservoirs largely above average levels. That's on top of an epic 2022-2023 water year. The effect was that groundwater levels rebounded in many areas.

Then this summer's brutal heat set in, drying up at-risk wells across the valley.

The nonprofit group Self-Help Enterprises has seen the influx firsthand.

Before June, staff were getting about five dry well calls a month. As temperatures escalated in June, calls skyrocketed to 15 a week. In the past three months, Self-Help has set up water tanks for about 55 households.

"We're seeing something different that we haven't seen before," said Tami McVay, director of emergency services for Self-Help. "It's later in the year with the increase of numbers."

The wells that are going dry are most likely already at-risk, said McVay, meaning they could be old or pulling water from depleted aquifers. "I really do feel like if we had the ability to be proactive and

go out and sound every well, these are probably wells that would have been on our vulnerable list,” said McVay.

Self-Help has 1,500 tanks serving households that have lost wells. The majority of those are from past years.

Because there has been increased surface water availability over the past two years, groundwater overpumping by agriculture has slowed and some groundwater levels have rebounded.

The wells going dry now aren’t necessarily because of overpumping, but because they were probably already nearing the end of their lifetime, said McVay.

And the unusual heat sweeping the valley is straining many families’ water supplies.

People are running swamp coolers more heavily and families, especially those with children, need to drink much more water, said McVay.

The bulk of the wells drying up so far are in the Fresno and Madera areas, according to Self-Help’s data.

## **FRESNO AREA FAMILY HAS WELL ISSUES**

Martha Berber knew something was wrong with her well when pressure diminished and sand started showing up in her sinks and bathtub in July. It was a serious concern especially since she had just started the process of adopting six children and was living in a household of ten, including her 29-year-old daughter. The children range from one to 11.

Her home, which is just outside the City of Fresno, relies on one well. But Berber had never experienced issues like this before, even during drought.

Because of how many children need water in the household, the well isn’t able to operate efficiently anymore and groundwater levels aren’t high enough anymore, said Berber.

“When I first moved in we knew it was old. It’s something that will eventually need maintenance,” said Berber. “But then, with the impact of 10 people in the home, it just sped along that process.”

Berber tried to use a filter to make the water drinkable but with the amount of sand coming out, she didn’t feel comfortable giving the water to her kids anymore. Instead, she started buying bottled water.

“Having the amount of kids I do and just constantly needing to buy water, I was finding it really, really difficult,” said Berber.

Then, she found out about Self-Help on a government website.

By mid-July, Self-Help installed a water tank and she hopes to qualify for Self-Help’s well service which could drill her well deeper. Fresno City staff told Berber she is not eligible to hook up to the city’s system because of her location.

“I’m so grateful that there’s programs like this, just because I really wouldn’t even know what to do with all the kids that I have,” said Berber.

## **'NOT A TYPICAL SUMMER'**

The nonstop heat this summer is not ordinary, even for the San Joaquin Valley, according to meteorologists.

"We've been seeing temperatures that are not typical, to have these temperatures occurring with the frequency that they have been," said Stephen McCoy, meteorologist at the National Weather Service's Hanford office. "It's not a typical summer."

Record breaking heat has swept the valley in areas that normally do not see such numbers. Merced, for example, saw six record highs in a nine day period this summer.

The cause is what's called an upper valley ridge, which is a dome of air that is trapping heat in the valley and throughout the western United States, said McCoy. These domes started appearing in June and are still present, causing extreme heat to continue. It's uncommon to see these heat domes so early in the season, said McCoy.

While Self-Help operates on the response side of things, there are preventive actions people can take. If residents live within the boundaries of a groundwater sustainability agency (GSA,) McVay recommends they reach out to GSA staff to have their well sounded. Residents can enter their address and find out if they are within a GSA here.

Read more at: <https://www.fresnobee.com/news/local/article290981360.html#storylink=cpy>