

Central California residents rely on bottled water as wells run dry

Extreme drought conditions have become so harsh for the Central Valley community of East Porterville, many of its residents dependent on their own wells have run out of water.

Roughly 300 homes have received a three-week supply of bottled water after Tulare County officials discovered their wells had gone dry.

In all, county officials distributed 15,552 1-gallon bottles of water, and have been filling a 2,500-gallon tank with nonpotable water so residents can flush toilets and bathe.

And the problem could be worse because many believe the number of people whose wells have gone dry is "grossly underreported," said Michael Lockman, manager of Tulare County's Office of Emergency Services.

If it wasn't for a local nonprofit group, county officials probably wouldn't have known that the residents were in dire need of water because they didn't ask for help, said Denise England, senior administrative analyst with the county's Water Resources Department.

"It was really surprising," she said.

County officials say East Porterville residents are typically very private, and for whatever reason, distrust the government.

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Lockman said some residents fear their landlord will evict them because their well went dry or are afraid the county's Department of Child Support Services will take their children away because they no longer have water -- a rumor the county has been working to dispel, he added.

"We are really trying to get the message out that we are just here to help," Lockman said.

In one case, county officials found up to 14 people living inside one home with an empty well.

It wasn't until after February that, as the drought wore on, many residents started looking to expand their wells, but the demand created a huge backlog among drilling companies. Now, a typical wait can be 12 to 18 months, Lockman said.

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