

2014 was the never-ending Earth Log story

By Mark Grossi



Chris Thiele delivered cases of bottled water in August to homes in East Porterville where hundreds of wells have gone dry.

MARK CROSSE — The Fresno Bee [Buy Photo](#)

I'm looking back at the last 12 months, checking out Earth Log stories — like Fresno's warmest temperatures on record and the corrosive air siege of November.

But drought was the story of 2014. I wrote about it all year, especially focusing on those for whom it was a daily ordeal. Their private wells dried up and their lives were changed. No one expressed it better than a Chowchilla resident in September.

After their well dried up, Jean Wilson, 63, and her husband, Garland, 71, decided to forget about drilling a new well, which would cost between \$20,000 and \$40,000. Instead, they installed a 4,000-gallon water tank that they refill every few months.

When they sell their home, maybe the next owner will want to drill a well, she said.

"We're talking about leaving California now," Jean said. "People fled the Dust Bowl and came to California in the 1930s. Now I think we need to go the other direction."

I don't always write year-end stories for Earth Log, but this one writes itself. We'll come back to the drought..

For me, the warmth was the surprise this year, mostly because I wasn't looking for it. I didn't notice the numbers until early November. Each month, Fresno's average temperature landed among the top 10 warmest on record.

January and August were the second-warmest on record. October and February set records as the warmest. Most of the other months were third-, fourth- or fifth-warmest.

Even with the freezing temperatures over the last several days of the year, December may wind up setting a record, too. Fresno's streak of warmer-than-average months goes back to March 2013.

And the statewide average temperature for 2014 is expected to set a record.

Back to drought: Farm losses are expected to be more than \$1.5 billion, according to a [study](#) by the University of California at Davis. The study says more than 400,000 acres were left fallow.

It was the third consecutive year of drought, and groundwater levels continue to drop. Now they are down 200 feet in parts of the west Valley. As the water sinks, so does the landscape — more than a foot in some areas.

The sinking ground threatens to damage canals, dams, roads and buildings. The nonprofit [California Water Foundation](#) in Sacramento has estimated the damage could range up to \$1.3 billion.

In East Porterville, hundreds of wells went dry and more than 1,000 residents have no indoor plumbing. More than [850 wells](#) have gone dry around Tulare County.

Bad air took a back seat to the drought, even though the Valley led the nation in the number of ozone exceedances. But in early November, air quality stepped into another uncomfortable spotlight. Throughout the Valley, monitors recorded rare levels of dangerous particles in the air for eight lung-tingling days.

Patient loads increased up to 30%, say allergists and other doctors. The episode kicked off the Valley's most dangerous air pollution season — November through the end of February. The microscopic debris is called PM-2.5.

The debris was not dominated by fireplace or diesel soot. Instead, it was ammonium nitrate, a nasty chemical melding of ammonia and oxides of nitrogen. Breathing these specks can cause a cascade of immune system responses.

A Selma woman, Carolyn Harris, 69, who has breast cancer, told me it was time to get serious about air pollution cleanup. She said the bad air has made her fragile condition worse.

“Who are we kidding here?” Harris asked. “Why do we need leaf blowers in schools around our children? Why do we need drive-up windows? When are we going to do something about our problems here?”

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