

# Taps may run dry in western Fresno County town after residents vote to oppose rate hike

By Marc Benjamin

CANTUA CREEK — Residents of this tiny western Fresno County town recently told Fresno County supervisors that they don't want to pay higher bills for water service to their tiny community — even if it means having their water shut off.

If they don't agree to pay more, Cantua Creek residents will stop getting water as early as mid-May. The town 40 miles southwest of Fresno is in a county service area. Under the rules, residents who live in such areas are required to pay for water purchases, water treatment and repairs and maintenance to their systems. Those costs are rising sharply.

The drought has caused raw water prices from Westlands Water District to more than triple, from \$348 per acre-foot last year to \$1,144 per acre-foot today.

The county's policies require each county service area to keep enough in reserve to pay for maintenance, repairs and price spikes. Residents last year approved a rate increase to a minimum \$72 per household, but that was before water prices soared. The district now has a deficit of \$66,000, which will reach \$90,000 without a rate increase by the end of June.

Water bills were proposed to rise to a base rate of \$102 per month as of March 1. The residents' votes were counted Feb. 24, and more than 70% turned down the \$30 monthly increase.

Cantua Creek's rates are significantly higher than current and projected water rates for urban Fresno, where water is expected to go from about \$25 per month for the typical home to \$49 in five years. Cantua Creek's 450 residents, many of whom are farm workers, single mothers, the elderly and others on fixed incomes, just can't pay the higher bill.

Alan Weaver, Fresno County's public works and planning director, said the town vote sent a message.

"Many of them are not employed because of the drought and their water costs went up because of the drought, so they are getting hit from both ends," he said. "Nothing they have done is their fault."

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Cantua Creek's median household income was \$30,698 in 2013, a third less than the county's median household income of \$45,563, and about half the state's median income of \$60,190.

Residents are unable to drink the town's water because it contains high levels of a chemical disinfectant. They use it to bathe, wash clothes, or in very few cases, irrigate what minimal landscaping remains.

Leticia Fernandez, a shopkeeper who has lived Cantua Creek since 1968, lugs a 5-gallon jug of drinking water from her porch into her home. It costs \$5.80 on top of her water bill and is used up in about a week.

"We're doing our part to conserve our water, but what else can we do?" Fernandez said. "If they cut us off, what can we do?"

As proof of her conservation, Fernandez has an orange Home Depot bucket, one of 400 brought to the community by California Rural Legal Assistance that was filled with water-saving shower heads, hose nozzles, faucets and rubber washers.

Fernandez stands outside Cantua Creek's two large water supply tanks talking with neighbor Antonio Mendoza, who said community members feel like they are fighting a losing battle. He said relatives in larger cities pay half of what Cantua Creek homeowners pay for the same services.

Mendoza, who has lived in Cantua Creek for 30 years, told county supervisors at a recent meeting that the town's families are financially strapped.

"Our community is a poor community and every day it gets more difficult to maintain our families and pay our utilities," he told supervisors through an interpreter. "The majority of people in our community work in agriculture, many of them earn minimum wage with a family to support and children ... we understand water has gone up in price and we want you to understand we cannot pay that."

Unless a solution is found, Cantua Creek would be the first county service area to have its water shut off, Weaver said. He estimates that the taps won't go dry until around mid-May because Westlands is required to send shut-off notices. In the meantime, county staff is talking to state water board officials and will report back to supervisors in early May with ideas to resolve the town's crisis, Weaver said.

The state has a drought emergency program and could tap funds to help, said Andrew DiLuccia, state water resources control board spokesman in Sacramento. He said the U.S. Department of Agriculture also has a program similar to the state's drought emergency effort.

Westlands has an agreement with the county to sell nonpotable water to communities including Huron and community service areas in Cantua Creek, El Porvenir and the O'Neill farming community, said Gayle Holman, spokeswoman for Westlands. The water is treated before going to residents.

The district has no water allocation from the federal Central Valley Project for this year, meaning that Westlands' valuable liquid commodity becomes even more pricey.

"We are expecting high prices because we just don't have the water supply available and it continues to get worse," Holman said. "It will be another devastating year and it will continue to decimate small pockets like Cantua Creek."

Fresno County Supervisor Brian Pacheco, who represents Cantua Creek, said he wants solutions fast, but there are none that immediately spring to mind since, by law, the county can't subsidize the service area.

"Some of the poorest people in our community are paying one of the highest water rates in the Valley," he said. "They are not asking for a handout, they just need help."

Fellow Supervisor Henry R. Perea said he is concerned that the residents will not get clean water. He's worried the county could be held responsible for finding a way to get them water.

"What if they sue and say 'County, you have a responsibility for keeping our water system going,'" Perea said. "Then it becomes a David and Goliath fight."

The county has money to plan a water project for Cantua Creek, which could result in a pipeline serving Cantua Creek, El Porvenir and some other small towns nearby. By linking the two communities' water systems, the cost for water could drop. That would likely be welcome news to El Porvenir residents, who Fernandez said already approved a rate increase and now pay \$110 monthly.

The ultimate fix, however, is still about two years away, said James Polfer, a senior engineer in the county's public works and planning department.

The county got \$725,000 from the state to plan and design in the new system, Polfer said. Because Cantua Creek and El Porvenir are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged communities, each is eligible for a \$3 million grant — a total of \$6 million — to build the water project. Polfer said that would be enough to join the two towns' water

systems.

“I can’t guarantee that the money will be there, but all indications are that it is,” Polfer said. “The purpose of the planning phase is to (get something built) that will remedy the problem.”

Contact Marc Benjamin: [mbenjamin@fresnobee.com](mailto:mbenjamin@fresnobee.com), (559) 441-6166 or [@beebenjamin](https://twitter.com/beebenjamin) on Twitter.