

Grant could solve East Porterville's water problems

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Despite recent rains, the waters of Lake Success remain low on Feb. 11 near East Porterville, Calif. Many local wells in Tulare County have run dry as the state begins its fourth year of severe drought. (Photo: David McNew, Getty Images)

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(Photo: David Castellon)

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EAST PORTERVILLE – Filling up plastic plastic garbage cans full of water every other day from a large tank parked in front of the Tulare County fire station isn't a pleasant task for Felix Herrera, but it's not as if he has a choice.

"I could be doing things other than this, but I gotta wash clothes," said Herrera, who lives down the street from the station.

About four-and-a-half months ago, his home well failed. "One day we had water, and the next day I heard the pump running with no water coming out."

So Herrera and his wife, as do hundreds of other people in this rural, south Tulare County town, fill up buckets, bottle, drums, trash cans and whatever else they can fit into the backs of their cars and pickup truck from two 5,000-gallon



water tanks parked in separate East Porterville neighborhoods.

For more than three years, California has been in the grip of a drought, with Tulare County suffering some of the worse effects. And East Porterville has become a sort of poster child for the region's drought problems.

Of the 952 dry wells that have been reported to Tulare County officials, nearly 600 are in East Porterville, said Andrew Lockman, manager of the county Office of Emergency Services.

But for residents here, some of whom have been without water for months longer than Herrera, hope may be on the horizon.

On Tuesday, the county Board of Supervisors will consider submitting a grant application for federal money to pay for drilling a new community well for the city of Porterville. The city then would connect its water system to neighboring East Porterville, providing residents there a reliable water supply.

The county, working with Porterville City officials already has obtained California Disaster Assistance Act grant money to cover three quarters of the estimated \$1.6 million cost of the well project, and county officials want to get the remaining \$400,000 from a U.S. Department of Agriculture grant.

But county Health and Human Services officials are asking for more than just permission to apply for the grant. They're asking that the county supervisors take a risk by giving authorization to send a letter to the city of Porterville that commits the county to funding the remaining dollars needed to drill the well.

What that means, Lockman said, is if Tulare County doesn't receive the USDA grant, the county would have to provide the \$400,000 — or less if the well can be drilled cheaper than expected.

"They want a financial commitment in writing to drill a new well," said Lockman, noting that Porterville city officials have said they without this commitment they may have city workers stop delivering non-potable water — for bathing, flushing toilets and washing clothes, but not for drinking — to 67 homes in East Porterville.



Felix Herrera of East Porterville fills containers in the back of his pickup truck with with water from a 5,000 tank, one

of two in the town providing non-potable water — for washing clothes, showering and flushing toilets, but not for drinking. Herrera's home is one of nearly 600 in the town that have had their wells run dry due to the Valley's drought. (Photo: David Castellon)

The county has been paying paying Porterville for the water and the costs to deliver it, and getting the water from another sources that would have to truck from farther away would be costly, Lockman said.

"What we've asked them to do is keep on filling those tanks," he said.

The county also has provided deliveries of bottled water to homes using state emergency money, and in recent weeks began a program to install drinking water in tanks at homes with California Disaster Assistance Act funding.

But these are short- and mid-term solutions to East Porterville's water problems, and hooking up to Porterville's water system would be a much-needed long-term solution.

And the clock is ticking, as the \$1.2 million in state money already committed to the Porterville well project will go away if work doesn't move forward on the project, according to HHSA's report to the supervisors.

"As I understand it, staying static would not be an option," Lockman said.

HHSA will ask the board to "take the risk" and commit to funding the well project, he said, noting that if the USDA doesn't award Tulare County the grant, county staff hasn't found any alternate grants to a apply for that might allow the county to get its money back.

"If we don't do it now, this community has no sense of if or when a long-term solution will come," Lockman said. "This going forward will give them some certainty."

Donna Johnson, an East Porterville resident and local activist who has worked to get assistance for her water-starved town, said Friday that she wasn't aware that the county supervisors plans to consider the grant application and didn't know enough about the matter to comment on it.

She did say, "I'm grateful it's on the table."

For his part, Herrera seemed skeptical that a solution to his town's water problems here might be worked out soon, as he noted that if the county gets the money to pay for a new Porterville well, by the time it's drilled, "That'll be 10 years from now."

How to attend

What: Tulare County Board of Supervisors meeting

When: 9 a.m. Tuesday; public comment starts at 9:30 a.m.

Where: Board of Supervisors chambers, 2800 W. Burrel Ave., Visalia

Get the agenda: Go to www.tularecounty.ca.gov/board, click on "Agenda Packets," then the meeting date.

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