

Tulare County approves well project to ease East Porterville drought woes

By Lewis Griswold



Chris Thiele delivers cases of bottled water to a home on South Maurer Street in East Porterville in August 2014. Many residents of East Porterville are getting no water or limited water from their wells because of the drought. THE FRESNO BEE | [Buy Photo](#)

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A plan to bring water to residents of drought-stricken East Porterville received a major boost Tuesday when the Tulare County Board of Supervisors voted to support building a new well.

The well would supply emergency water for East Porterville homeowners whose wells have gone dry and who have household water-storage tanks to accept deliveries by tanker truck.

But renters may be out of luck — county officials said landlords are responsible for supplying running water to tenants.

County officials said they expect the \$1.6 million well will be funded by state and federal governments, but there's a chance the county could be on the hook for \$400,000 if anticipated federal money falls through.

"There's an act of faith here," but a new well would benefit the area, board chairman Steve Worthley said.



The new well would take 10 months to build and be operated by the water department of neighboring Porterville.

Under an agreement with the city that's still being negotiated, potable water from Porterville would be delivered by tanker truck to East Porterville homes that have food-grade household water tanks.

Supervisors voted 4-1 for the well project, with Supervisor Phil Cox voting no, saying there's no provision for those who would get the water to help pay for the well.

"Where does it stop?" Cox said. "When do we stop being the deep pockets?"

Living in the unincorporated county involves being self-reliant and not having access to municipal services, supervisors said.

Supervisor Ben Ennis said East Porterville property owners can get temporary help from the county, but it's up to them to drill new wells.

"There's water. You just have to drill a well that's deep enough," he said. "If you are a renter, the property owner is going to have to drill a well."

The state Office of Emergency Services said it would pay for 75% of the well project. Meanwhile, the county is applying for a U.S Department of Agriculture grant to pay for the rest.

There's a good chance the grant will be approved, County Administrative Officer Jean Rousseau said.

An estimated 6,000 to 7,000 people live in East Porterville, a largely low-income rural residential area where an estimated 600 wells have gone dry.

East Porterville made headlines statewide last summer when officials installed a large tank of nonpotable water on the street, where residents filled jugs to take home.

The county also set up a place to take showers, delivered bottled water to homes and have signed up 516 households for free bottled water delivery funded by the state until the drought eases or the money runs out.

It's uncertain how many dwellings are in East Porterville, but there are about 1,800 parcels and 336 homes are hooked up to the city water system via a trunk line extending into part of the area.

The rest are on individual wells, many of them shallow, that started going dry last year.

Some residents installed water tanks in their yards, hooked them up to the plumbing system and get water deliveries by truck. But officials said it appears the tanks are not approved for potable water and are supposed to be used only for flushing toilets, laundry and showers.

In consultation with state officials, the county Office of Emergency Services launched a new program to install food-grade water tanks that can hold 1,500 to 2,500 gallons of potable water, allowing residents to have regular tap water in their homes again.

It is expected that Porterville will supply water for the household tank program before the well is built under an agreement being negotiated.

The Porterville City Council must approve the agreement, but supplying water to East Porterville is the right thing to do, Porterville Council Member Cam Hamilton said.

"We're in an extraordinary situation," he said. "We're not talking welfare; we're talking humanitarian action."

Under current rules, the tanks can be installed at owner-occupied homes but not rentals, said Andrew Lockman,

manager of the county Office of Emergency Services.

A total of 22 tanks have been installed so far and potable water is being trucked to them by certified haulers, but the number is expected to grow into the hundreds as the installations pick up speed, he said.

Those tanks in East Porterville would receive Porterville city water deliveries. Deliveries would occur every week or two, depending on family size.

The water can only be used for household use and not landscaping, Lockman said. The county pays for the water deliveries and is reimbursed 75% by the state.

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