

Tulare County wells failing at rapid clip

Dennis L. Taylor 12:42 p.m. PDT April 13, 2015

Seven times the number of wells are being drilled than at this time in 2011

(Photo: Steve R. Fujimoto)

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A significant number of wells that are going bad is qualifying Tulare County residents at a rate of two bottles of water a day to help, according to county health officials.

For the week ending March 25, there have been 976 Tulare County wells go dry since January 2014 — 14 additional wells from the prior week. That's scary news for users relying on well water, which is roughly four in 10 Tulare County residents.

As the water table drops, not only is there less water but the water that's left becomes more contaminated with unhealthy compounds. Many wells in the San Joaquin Valley have tested positive for contaminants such as nitrates, arsenic and bacteria, according to Visalia-based Community Water Center.



Nick Tellez, left, and Derek Pedersen of C.J. Hammer Pump Co. service an 10-inch irrigation well north of Ivanhoe. (Photo: Juan Villa)

Continuous drought conditions is forcing more groundwater pumping, causing water tables to sink and water pumps to lose pressure and suck in contaminants.

Nitrates can cause a potentially lethal condition in newborns called "Blue Baby Syndrome." As the name implies, nitrate interferes with the ability of blood cells to carry oxygen. Arsenic is a known cancer-causing element.

When groundwater diminishes, contaminants also become a problem because they occur in higher concentrations. For example, if you put a teaspoon of nitrate into a cup of water, it will register a certain concentration. If you put the same amount in a half-cup of water, the concentration will double.

By far the most affected area, and most documented, is in the Porterville area, particularly East Porterville where roughly 600 of the 976 well failures have occurred, said Andrew Lockman, manager of the Office of Emergency Services for Tulare County. The water table there is shallow and it drops very quickly under drought conditions.

Particularly in East Porterville, hundreds of wells have gone dry leaving several thousands of residents with insufficient clean water to meet their daily cooking and sanitation needs and are being forced to adapt to a life without basic water resources, said Jenny Rempel, communications and development coordinator for the Community Water Center.

In normal years, the Tule River would recharge groundwater in the Porterville area. But a combination of the drought and decisions to divert water to irrigation instead of recharge has left wells sucking dust in East Porterville. A glance at a map of failed wells in Tulare County shows the heaviest concentration in and around that community of about 7,000.



Scott Lopez, left, Sady Cass, and Nicholas Tellez, right, get ready to test a newly drilled well for pressure in front of Jerry Phillips' house. (Photo: Steve R. Fujimoto)

Thanks to strong advocacy by the nonprofit group Porterville Coordinating Council, the city of Porterville has been supplying 300-gallon tanks to residents, but those tanks are not certified for potable water. Users had been receiving bottled water under Gov. Jerry Brown's emergency drought funding, but that is wrapping up. Now water is being trucked in to fill 2,500-gallon tanks supplied by the state that are being set up in people's yards.

A problem with the tank solution is that state regulations prohibit renters from receiving the tanks, so they are back on

single-use bottles of water.

Well failures are also hitting the pocketbook. In the town of Goshen, a main well began to go dry, causing silt and nitrate problems, so the town connected to the city of Visalia's municipal water system. Goshen residents now have clean water, but are paying at least \$75 a month.

Over in Cutler, the shortage of water prompted the city to attempt to pass an ordinance regulating the number of nonfamily members that could live in one house. It failed.

And in Cantua Creek in Fresno County, the drought forced residents on well water to consider hooking up to a municipal system, but the significantly higher rates resulted in voters turning down the measure.

Dry wells are also causing a surge of social issues as well. Rempel said there is a good deal of under-reporting of failed or failing wells.

"What would you do if you have children? Rempel said. "Would you report not having water and risk a visit from Child Protective Services?"

At least one segment of the community is faring well — well drillers. For the first three months in 2011 there were 23 domestic and 40 irrigation well permits submitted in Tulare County, according to the county Health and Human Services department. In the first three months of of this year, 84 domestic well permits and 280 irrigation well permits applied for — a seven-fold increase.

"A lot of local [drillers] aren't even answering their phones," said Mike Lincicum, the owner of Mike's Well Drill and Pump in Visalia.

Lincicum said the calls he's receiving are split about 50-50 between domestic wells running dry and irrigation wells running low.

"We drilled 20 permits last week and I'm still about a year backlogged," Lincicum said.

Dennis L. Taylor covers water issues for the Visalia Times-Delta. Follow him on Twitter [@taylor_saqlnews](#).

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