

# Tankers pumping water in drought anger residents near Porterville

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Tensions are rising in a rural neighborhood west of Porterville as water haulers pump from a community well for delivery to drought-stricken East Porterville a few miles way.

There have already been a number of incidents: Water tanker drivers have been threatened by irate residents, cars have been parked in front of the well to block access, some people have followed tankers and, in one instance, a rock was thrown at a truck window, said Andrew Lockman, director of the Tulare County Office of Emergency Services.

No one has been hurt, he said.

The residents of Jones Corner, which has about 120 homes and an estimated population of 470, say pumping the water in a drought puts their community at risk of running dry.

“I’m being told we have plenty of water, but you see what surrounds us — mature walnut trees,” said longtime resident Jack Flores, pointing to adjacent farms. “Everybody is drawing from the same water source.”

The fears of residents are unfounded, because the well’s water supply is 200 to 300 feet deep, Lockman said.

He said the well water level has fallen only 5 feet this summer.

“They are far away from having a problem...It’s an irrational fear, given all the data.”

Residents say the tankers come five days a week, several times a day.

“People are upset,” Flores said. “How much longer can this go on?”

One man is keeping a tally of trucks as they come and go, Flores said, noting that he once followed a truck at night to see where it was going.

The hard feelings are a product of the drought, said Rosemary Caso, executive director of United Way of Tulare County, which coordinates water deliveries to homes in East Porterville and elsewhere.

“It’s such a precious resource, they take it personally,” Caso said.

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Jack Flores, resident of Jones Corner

Water hauling disputes have made the news lately. Actor Tom Selleck this month was accused of stealing water when officials reported a tanker truck repeatedly filled up at a public hydrant and hauled water to Selleck’s 60-acre Hidden Valley ranch in Ventura County.

The Calleguas Municipal Water District said last week it had reached a tentative settlement with Selleck.

Distrust could be fueling the fears of Jones Corner residents, said Russell Adelson, a clinical psychologist with offices in Fresno and Merced.

“It’s fair to say a lot of people in the country, maybe the majority, don’t feel they can trust the government,” Adelson

said. "And they don't trust big business, either."

People in the community of 470 likely trust each other, he said. This interconnected trust among citizens could lead to one person igniting emotions in another, he said. "There may be a little bit of mob fear."

In the end, though, it's distrust that probably is guiding the actions, Adelson said.

But Tulare County is legally removing the Jones Corner water, which is being paid for, officials said.

The city of Porterville owns the water system in Jones Corner, also known as Village Gardens, and reached an agreement with the county to let water haulers draw up to 500,000 gallons a month from one of two wells for delivery to East Porterville.

A meter measures the water pumped into the water tankers, and the city bills for it. The state pays 75% of the cost and the county 25%. In May and June combined, 250,000 gallons were drawn, Lockman said.

The wells at Jones Corner are not connected to the city's main urban water system.

It's an irrational fear given all the data.

Andrew Lockman, Tulare County Office of Emergency Services

A petition signed by more than 130 residents opposing "any water being taken from the Jones Corner well" was delivered last month to the Porterville City Council.

But because Jones Corner is outside city limits, residents lack clout in Porterville.

Lockman said the city and county failed to properly notify the community that water tankers would be hauling water to East Porterville.

"A better job could have been done upfront," he said.

Porterville city officials did not return phone calls seeking comment.

The water is going to East Porterville, a county area where shallow wells went dry last year and about 1,000 people lost running water, a number that has since grown.

Many East Porterville residents are getting by on bottled water and nonpotable water from a community tank, and some have water tanks in their front yards that are hooked to their home plumbing.

The water haulers deliver to the tanks.

Tanker sizes range from 1,600 gallons to 6,800 gallons — the size of a milk tanker — and larger trucks get more attention.

Flores said someone followed a water tanker and witnessed water deliveries to places other than East Porterville, which is not allowed under the agreement between the city and the county.

"We need accountability," he said.

Lockman said one hauler mistakenly made seven deliveries outside of the allowed area.

The water pumping has already led to violence. Water hauler Jim Brough of Clovis, owner of Aqua Man water tankers, said someone threw a chunk of asphalt at one of his trucks on a Friday night after dark as he was headed back to Clovis for the weekend. The chunk of asphalt struck the wing window on the passenger side and shattered it, he said.

He said he still has the asphalt chunk.

It's not known if the rig was targeted because it's a water truck, but "we've had a lot of trouble," he said. "They follow us and block entrance."

He said he called the California Highway Patrol about the rock-throwing incident, but the CHP told him it would not respond and gave him a number to call if he needed to file an insurance claim.

The CHP office in Porterville said there's no record of a call about a rock being thrown. But it's a crime to throw an object at a vehicle, officer Julie Lavender said.

In another instance, someone told an owner-operator of a water hauler to "watch your back," the United Way's Caso said. The driver called the sheriff's department, she said.

The Tulare County Sheriff's Department said it got a call July 9 from a water truck driver saying he had been threatened, and that someone was following him to East Porterville, but by the time a deputy arrived the person had left. The incident was ruled unfounded and no report was taken.

Lockman said the county has not asked the sheriff's department to escort water tankers, but "if we have to, we will."

Staff writer Barbara Anderson contributed to the story. Lewis Griswold: [559-441-6104](tel:559-441-6104), [@fb\\_LewGriswold](https://www.facebook.com/LewGriswold)