

Years later, 7 Tulare County towns still wait for clean drinking water

By Mark Grossi
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In 2011, folks in northern Tulare County were in an uproar about a project that seemed ready to get fresh Kings River water for seven communities where dangerous chemicals lurk in the well water.

The river water was made available — no small feat anywhere in California — yet the project was going nowhere. Foot-dragging state bureaucrats and technicalities were stopping it.

Four years later, there's a different state agency handling the funding for drinking water projects. The picture is brightening. But this project still is years away from delivering water and a long-term solution to water contamination problems in the area.

The seven communities are getting together Wednesday to talk about a regional water treatment plant, which is needed when river water is used. The meeting starts at 5 p.m. in Orosi, and it is called the Northern Tulare County Regional Water Project's All-Stakeholder Summit.

Translation: Time to get a good idea moving.

It's still in the planning and studying process, but a funding application for construction could be submitted next year.

17,000 people in northern Tulare County would get healthy drinking water

Aside from Orosi, the communities include Cutler, East Orosi, Monson, Seville, Sultana and Yettem. We're talking about 17,000 people, many of whom avoid drinking the well water coming out of their taps.

People in these farmworker communities spend up to 10% of their incomes on bottled water to protect their families. Why?

The dominating groundwater problem is nitrates, which are chemicals coming from septic systems, farm fertilizer, decomposing vegetation and dairies. In high doses, nitrates can cause a potentially fatal blood disease in infants. [Nitrates](#) also have been linked to cancer and birth defects.

New wells can give folks a healthy water supply, but it doesn't last. The contamination is widespread, and it finds a way into the wells. The best answer would be to have river water.

Years ago, Alta Irrigation District, based in nearby Dinuba, came up with a plan to provide the extra Kings River water. Engineers have told me the regional plant would cost about \$20 million. It would take a few years to construct.

The Fresno Bee has written about the state funding delays for drinking water projects. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has noticed, too.

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Two years ago, EPA publicly scolded the state for not investing more than \$450 million in federal drinking water improvement money in California.

The state has taken the drinking water program from the State Department of Public Health and turned it over to the

[State Water Resources Control Board.](#)

State officials also have streamlined the funding process and plan to use hundreds of millions of dollars on backlogged drinking water projects all over California.

Back in Tulare County, all seven communities need to be onboard with this Kings River water project. They need to form a joint powers agreement, consolidate into a single water-utility district or come up with some other legal entity to represent everyone.

The Community Water Center and Self-Help Enterprises, both based in Visalia, have organized the meeting on Wednesday in Orosi.

Ryan Jensen, organizer for Community Water Center, says a working group should be in place by August and ready to push forward on the project.

Keep your eye on this one. It's a poster child for the kind of water project that the state says it promotes for long-term, regional fixes.

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