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Private-well pollutants high

Tulare County private wells test high for nitrates

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In late afternoon, the line starts at the bright blue water kiosk just outside the Hong Kong restaurant on El Monte Avenue in Orosi. Instead of using their own tap water, many residents in northern Tulare County are buying bottled water to drink.

This scene is repeated in many rural areas of Tulare County, and Orosi-area residents have long dealt with well water quality that has gone from bad to worse, local residents say. So much, in fact, that they have banded together into the Tulare County citizens' watchdog group known as "Asociación de Gente Unida al Agua" or AGUA.

On Monday, the group reacted to last week's latest state test results of 922 private wells in various California locations, including 181 Tulare County wells.

"Our children deserve to have clean water to drink," said Maria Elena Orozco, an AGUA member and an East Orosi resident, in a written statement prepared by AGUA attorney Laurel Firestone. "Clean water is a human right."

According to the state's Groundwater Ambient Monitoring Assessment Board tests released Nov. 9 — the results of which were sent to the various Tulare County private well owners last week — say 135 of the 181 wells tested contained more coliform bacteria and nitrates than California standards allow.

"The problem is decades in the making, and is only getting worse the longer that groundwater is not protected adequately," Firestone said.

Nitrates have long been an issue with local private well water, Firestone said, and are "acute" contaminants that have been linked to a variety of health problems.

Often, Firestone said, local users have to resort to "reverse-osmosis filters" to clean out the nitrates.

"But those filters have to be maintained," Firestone said. "They have to be installed properly, and they have to be replaced periodically. Otherwise, people will get water that has even more contaminants in it than if they did nothing."

Tulare County health officials are well aware of private well water issues, although the county is directly responsible for the safety of public water sources. Still, the county launched its own private well-testing program earlier this year, said county water-testing official Loon Bridge.

"We look for several specific substances [in the water]," said Bridge. "Testing the private wells gives us data over a wider area."

Tulare County Environmental Health Department spokeswoman Nancy Loliva said that the county needs to take a detailed look at the state testing figures before coming to any conclusions and recommending remedial action.

In the meantime, many county residents can only wait — and keep filling up their drinking water bottles elsewhere.

"Now that the government knows we have contaminated water, they cannot ignore this any more," said AGUA member Juan Gomez and leader of a northern Tulare County group called Vecinos Unidos, which represents Cutler, Orosi and East Orosi. "Communities should not have to pay the price of unregulated pollution."

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