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Central Valley continues marathon fight for clean drinking water

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David McNeir is a bishop of his church and a man of faith. But he has found himself banging his hand on a table more than once when negotiating with public health authorities for clean drinking water.

"We've always had bad water," said McNeir, a cannery employee who lives in Monterey Park Tract, an area southwest of Modesto flanked by dairies and farms. "We've been on a list for a project now for four or five years. We've applied for every kind of grant there is."

Up and down the Central Valley, the frustration is palpable.

After years of effort by community activists, politicians and even young teens, the state's progress toward clean water for all is dwarfed by discoveries of more problems. Residents continue to rely on groundwater tainted by pesticides, nitrates, industrial chemicals and arsenic.

Californians have voted twice for bond money to ensure clean water, with $230 million in grants and loans aimed at mostly small and disadvantaged communities.

The state also receives annual federal money for clean-water projects, this year totaling $67 million. And, thanks to the federal stimulus plan, the state's getting another $160 million bump.

But a 2007 federal study estimated it will take $39 billion over 20 years to improve California's drinking water quality.

Adding to delays is the fact that budget problems forced the state to stop taking applications for bond money in December.

"Having money frozen is 10 steps back," said Susana De Anda of the Community Water Organization in Visalia.

De Anda's group has decided it's time to try a new tack: Pass a state law declaring clean water a human right.

A grass-roots movement

Joanna Mendoza, a 13-year-old in the Tulare County town of Cutler, said families are tired of receiving official warnings that their water contains a pesticide linked to cancer.

Residents spend money every month to buy bottled water, on top of paying for what comes out of the tap.

"The only thing that ever changes on those notices is the date," said Mendoza, who belongs to Youths for Water, a group of Central Valley teenagers who are urging their water districts to find ways to improve water quality.

Two decades ago, Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers Union rallied farmworkers in the Central Valley to demand better drinking water. As awareness and testing for contaminants grew, water districts and even entire communities have joined the call for action.

That's happening in Monterey Park Tract, where McNeir is chairman of a small utility district that provides water to 48 homes.

In November the state dropped the maximum allowable level of arsenic from 50 to 10 micrograms per liter of water. One well in Monterey Park Tract has three times that standard.

For two decades, McNeir said, local wells also have violated the standard for nitrates, which seep into groundwater from leaking septic tanks, farm fertilizers and – as the state's dairy industry has grown – cow manure.

Attempts to dig new wells have run into more pollution, and efforts to find funding sources have failed.

Now, McNeir's district is looking for money to drill a cleaner well farther away or to tap into a neighboring city's water system.

A growing problem

Officials at California's Public Health Department acknowledge it's difficult to monitor 8,000 public water systems and enforce more than 100 drinking water standards and regulations.

With limited funding, money goes first to water systems contaminated by an acute bacteriological threat, such as fecal matter that can sicken someone instantly. In those cases, the law requires public health authorities to act swiftly, ordering districts to close wells or provide bottled water.

It's much harder to get prompt action when contaminants pose long-term health threats, such as cancer risks.

Yet that may be the biggest challenge.

In November, California followed the federal government in setting a lower safety standard for arsenic in drinking water. That decision meant scores of water systems suddenly were serving up too much arsenic with their drinking water.

Arsenic is common in the West, seeping into water from rock or through runoff from mining or orchards. Even if concentrations do not trigger an immediate water system closure, they can pose cancer risks and vascular and skin problems.

South Lake Tahoe and Galt have water systems that violate the new arsenic standard. Both are developing treatment plants.

Though those two cities can handle the cost, that's not true of all.

"Small systems just don't have that ratepayer base," said Dennis Cocking, spokesman for the South Lake Tahoe utility district. After construction, he warns, districts must shoulder ongoing costs for maintenance and disposal of the concentrated arsenic waste.

In the Fresno County town of Lanare, population 640, a $210,000 arsenic treatment plant went on line in October 2006 and was shut down the following spring. Lanare couldn't afford the treatment chemicals or the electricity.

To the southwest, in Tulare County, Alpaugh – population 840 – received a notice from state health officials on Dec. 18 warning that its drinking water had violated arsenic standards for

several years and should be cleaned up.

On Dec. 23, Alpaugh received another letter advising that its state grant had been frozen, and that it should not sign a contract yet to build an arsenic treatment system.

For months, the district waited. In April, the state Department of Finance lifted the stay on some grants awarded before the freeze, including Alpaugh's. But no one on Alpaugh's water board knew that until The Bee told them.

"Well, it's something I would have liked to have known," said Josephine Jennings, the board's executive director.

Contaminants spur warnings

Before arsenic became an issue, the Central Valley's major water-related concerns focused on other chemicals, including perchlorate, the pesticide DBCP and nitrates.

Public health officials consider nitrates an "acute" health risk, but the state policy in most cases is simply to issue a warning that water should not be boiled – which concentrates the nitrates – and that pregnant women and infants should not drink it.

Tulare County is the largest dairy county in the world, and nitrates are pervasive. In groundwater tests of small water systems with more than 200 customers, about 20 percent exceeded state limits.

The Tulare County town of Cutler has lost some of its wells to nitrates. Residents have been warned their water has too much of another contaminant, the pesticide DBCP, which was banned in 1977 for causing cancer and sterility.

Cutler was not listed as violating DBCP standards in a 2007 report. But a new state Water Resources Control Board database shows its wells have violated those standards since 1988.

On June 18, residents received notice once again that their water contains DBCP but that there is no immediate threat requiring them to stop drinking it.

The resulting confusion breeds suspicion, not just of the water, but of the surrounding farms.

Cutler resident Jesus Quevedo, 75, blames his son's death last year from leukemia on the water and on exposure to farm chemicals in the air.

"The farmers are fighting for water to grow crops," he said. "We agree with them. But we are also fighting for water to drink that is pure."

Dionicio Rodriguez, supervisor of the Cutler Public Utility District, said the district was approved for $2.2 million in state grant money this year to dig a new well and install a tank to blend water. That money was frozen.

Looming on the horizon is another potential monster cleanup problem.

More than five years past a January 2004 deadline set by the Legislature, California still has not set a drinking water standard for the carcinogenic industrial toxic substance hexavalent chromium, the subject of the movie "Erin Brockovich," set in the town of Hinkley. State researchers must adopt a public health goal before they can set a maximum contaminant level for the chemical in drinking water.

David Spath, former director of the drinking water and environmental management division of the state Department of Public Health, said hundreds of sources could be in violation once the standard is set. "That's the next train wreck, so to speak," he said.

Policy statement sought

Susana De Anda of the Community Water Organization in Visalia said watching communities struggle for so long without clean drinking water led her to believe a simple, strong statement was in order.

She's hoping AB 1242, a bill known as the Human Right to Water, will require that state agencies act more quickly to assist communities that keep getting overlooked because contamination is not considered an acute threat.

The bill was introduced by Assemblyman Ira Ruskin, D-Los Altos. The Assembly passed it in May, and it is now in the state Senate.

"We're mindful of the budget problems, so it doesn't ask for money," De Anda said. "But this bill is one step forward because it sets a policy. Once you have a policy, then you have to act. It should not be taking years and years to get clean drinking water."

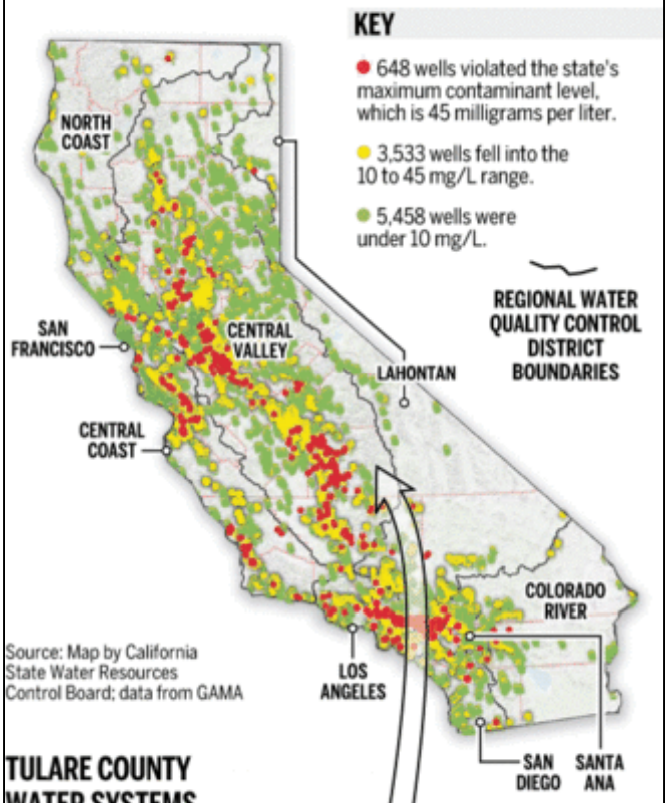
Call Susan Ferriss, Bee Capitol Bureau, (916) 321-1267.

HIGH NITRATE LEVELS

Nitrates from leaking septic tanks, farm fertilizers and dairy-farm cow manure pollute groundwater in many parts of California. The results illustrated in this map show 9,639 wells tested in 2007.

The wells are a diverse sample. Not all of them furnish drinking water. The well information comes from various state and county agencies.

The map does not reflect the quality of water that comes out of the tap in a region, but it does show parts of the state that have problems with nitrates in groundwater.

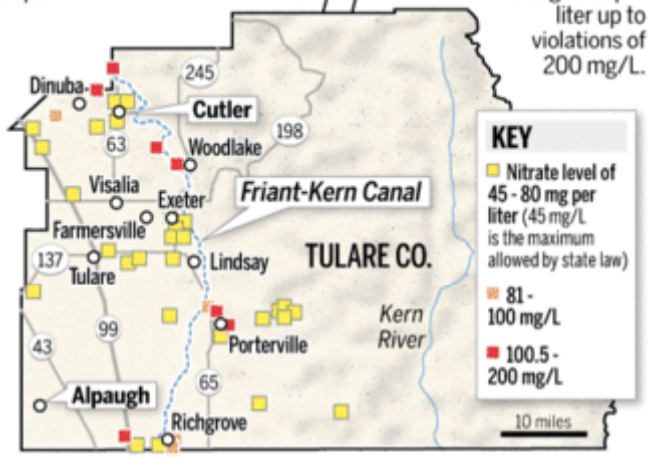


Source: Map by California State Water Resources Control Board; data from GAMA

TULARE COUNTY WATER SYSTEMS

Many Tulare County towns have high levels of nitrates in their groundwater. Running through the area is the Friant-Kern Canal, part of the government-run system that ferries water from the San Joaquin River to irrigate crops.

The towns have no legal rights to canal water as an alternative drinking water source. The map shows levels of nitrates in groundwater from more than 45 milligrams per liter up to violations of 200 mg/L.



Source: Map by Tulare County Environmental Health Services Division (2008)

HAZARDOUS SUBSTANCES

The California Department of Health keeps records on public water systems that violate maximum contaminant levels of various hazardous substances. The 2007 report is the most recent collection of data available. But this information has been found to be incomplete because county health officials and water systems sometimes are late or fail to report violations.

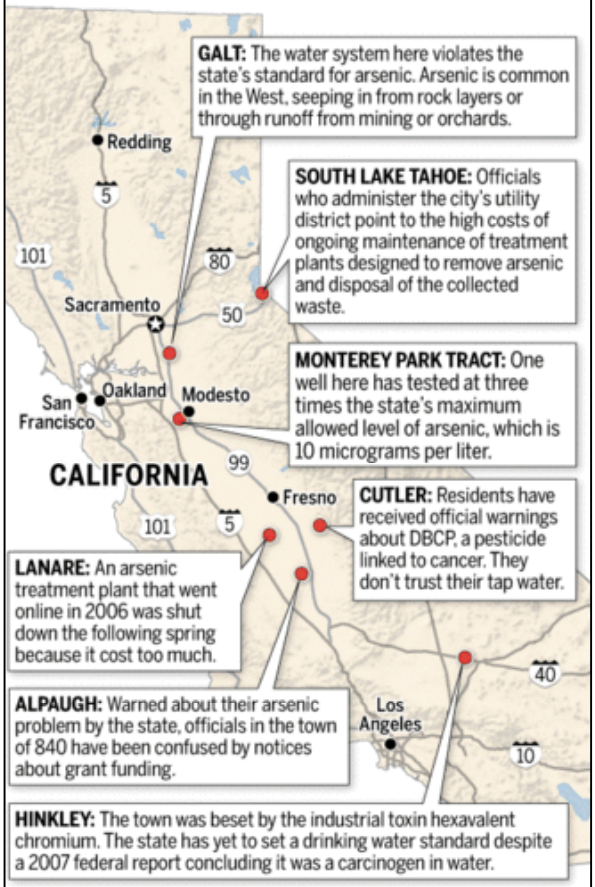
TYPE OF CONTAMINANT	VIOLATIONS 2005	2006	2007
Inorganic contaminants	101	120	273
Synthetic organic contaminants	4	5	2
Volatile organic contaminants	0	0	2
Radionuclide contaminants	4	7	10
Total coliform	683	723	456
Disinfectant and disinfection byproducts	100	74	31
Surface water treatment	70	50	26
Filter backwash recycle	NA	0	0
Lead and copper	0	1	4

Source: California Department of Public Health

http://geotrackerbeta.ecointeractive.com/gama

The state Water Resources Control Board recently put a database online that allows people to check the health of wells by city and county and state. Contaminants in wells do not reflect what comes out of the tap, but they do offer an indication of the types of problems that exist in certain areas. The database is called **GAMA,** Groundwater Ambient Monitoring and Assessment.

DRINKING WATER CONTAMINATION



Source: Bee reporting by Susan Ferriss

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