San Joaquin Valley residents express their concern over drinking water contamination
By
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“We need the help of communities in Los Angeles and San Francisco to pass strict laws that stop the problem of contamination,” said Jesus Quevedo.

Berta Diaz pays twice for the water she and her four children use in their home. Once a month, she drops off an envelope with $57 at the office of her local water provider, the East Orosi Community Services District. In the same week, she loads her car with seven 5-gallon garrafones (water jugs) and drives into the next town to fill them up at a machine that sells purified water. She must do this every week in order to have an adequate supply of potable water in her home, spending as much as $50-60 at the vending machine every month.

“For drinking and cooking, the tap water is no good,” says Diaz, a single parent of four children, ages 17-22. “It’s contaminated.” She first moved to the United States from Michoacán, Mexico in 1990, eventually settling in East Orosi, a predominantly Latino rural community in the San Joaquin Valley.

East Orosi is one of hundreds of communities in California that must deal with the added burden of tap water that is both expensive and unsafe. Households in these communities rely on groundwater from community wells that are often contaminated with pesticides, animal waste and fertilizer byproducts. These

communities receive little funding to maintain their wells and water systems. As a result, the costs of dealing with contamination are passed onto individual users, who are predominantly Latino and low-income.

The water used by East Orosi residents is contaminated with nitrate, a chemical found in animal manure and nitrogen-based fertilizer. In and around dairy farms and agricultural fields with heavy fertilizer use, nitrates easily pass through soil and contaminate local groundwater supplies.

Ingestion of nitrates in drinking water can cause low blood oxygen levels in infants, a condition called blue baby syndrome, a life-threatening condition that is often signaled by a bluish pigmentation of the skin. The contaminant has also been linked with various forms of cancer. As a result, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has established a health standard for nitrates of 45 milligrams per liter for drinking water.

Nearly 400,000 people lived in communities where tap water violated these guidelines in 2007, according to research by doctoral candidate Carolina Balazs at UC Berkeley. The problem is especially acute in the San Joaquin Valley, a vast agricultural region that stretches from Stockton to Bakersfield.

“In California, the majority of people exposed to nitrate-contaminated water live in the San Joaquin Valley,” says Balazs, “with a disproportionate exposure among predominantly Latino communities.” Her preliminary research results show that, of the people living in communities with the worst water quality, 65 percent are Latino and 50 percent are near or below the poverty line. “These numbers are above the Valley and state-wide averages,” says Balazs.

Jesús Quevedo, 76, has lived in Cutler for 40 years, an unincorporated community in Tulare County whose water system is contaminated with pesticides.

“The unjust reality in the San Joaquin Valley is that if you live in a predominantly Latino community, your water quality is likely to be worse,” says Susana De Anda, co-director of the Community Water Center in Visalia, Calif., an organization that works with impacted communities in the San Joaquin Valley to advocate for safe and affordable drinking water. “That’s why, in communities like East Orosi, people are faced with a choice when it comes to their drinking water: either pay with your pocketbook or pay with your health.”

Polluters not held accountable

Agricultural runoff is a major contributor to nitrate contamination of groundwater. But, according to a 2001 report by the Natural Resource Defense Council, “agricultural practices (…) have traditionally received less regulation than any other major industry and source of contamination.” Few regulations exist to monitor and limit the amount of fertilizer farmers apply to their fields. When contaminant levels exceed legal thresholds, polluters are rarely fined, even though the majority receives routine violation notices.

In Tulare County, where East Orosi is located, dairy farms are a major source of contamination. Cow manure from these facilities is typically collected in retention ponds and then applied as fertilizer to nearby fields used to grow animal feed. These ponds can be lined with clay, concrete, or synthetic material to prevent the leaking of nitrates into the groundwater, but few dairy farms employ these methods, nor do they regulate how much wastewater they apply to their fields.

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board is responsible for ensuring that these facilities' wastewater discharge does not exceed legal limits. But according to a 2005 report by the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water, the board had only 7 staff members to regulate 1700 animal facilities. As a result, studies indicate that, in some counties, up to 63 percent of dairy farms sampled have at least one nitrate-polluted well.

But the lack of oversight is not just the result of a regulatory body understaffed. Since 1982, the board exempted dairy farms and other agricultural operations from the reporting and permitting requirements of California clean water laws. This trend persisted even as state regulators maintained that agricultural runoff contributes to the pollution of every significant waterway in the San Joaquin Valley.

"The Regional Water Board has a mandate to protect the groundwater and surface waters of the region," says De Anda. "Instead, they waive any regulation that would prevent pollution of groundwater."

In 2005, the water quality board began proceedings that would monitor and regulate discharge from dairy farms. Residents from rural communities impacted by groundwater contamination, with the help of Community Water Center, participated in proceedings to consider these new regulations.

"We told them that in the rural areas where we live there are more cows than people," says Diaz, who participated in public hearings in Fresno and Sacramento. "We can't continue to allow these dairies to contaminate our water."

In 2007, a general order requiring dairy farms to submit waste management plans outlining how facilities will improve their operations to protect groundwater was passed. Many clean water advocates maintain that these new requirements are still far from adequate.

"The reality is that dairy farms still have a lot of leeway in how they dispose their wastewater," says Laurel Firestone, co-director of the Community Water Center. "But at least it's better than nothing."

Discriminatory Policies at the County Level

Public water systems can address nitrate contamination by drilling new wells, connecting to a nearby system with uncontaminated water, or physically removing nitrates from the water supply through a treatment method called reverse osmosis. But many rural communities don't have the resources or capacity to implement these options. Outside of any city boundaries, unincorporated communities (sometimes referred to as colonias) have been systematically neglected in the allocation of public resources, leaving communities like Diaz's home of East Orosi in a perpetual state of disrepair.

In the case of Tulare County, this neglect was written into official planning documents. The Tulare County General Plan, which is being updated for the first time since 1971, includes the following language under the 'Water and Liquid Waste Management' element: "Public commitments to communities with little or no authentic future should be carefully examined before final action is initiated. These non-viable communities would, as a consequence of withholding major public facilities such as sewer and water systems, enter a process of long term, natural decline as residents depart for improved opportunities in nearby communities."

Berta Diaz and her daughter Maribel at their home in East Orosi, Calif. Tap water in East Orosi is contaminated with nitrate, a chemical found in animal manure and nitrogen-based fertilizer. Berta spends between 50 and 60 dollars on vended water every month.

The plan goes on to list 15 communities that "are expected to lose population because of the factors mentioned above." Of these, at least 10 have had problems with water contamination in the last 5 years, including East Orosi.

"Throughout the San Joaquin Valley, we've seen historical and persistent discrimination in the allocation of resources," says De Anda. Community Water Center began mobilizing residents in rural communities to call for the reversal of this county-level policy in 2005, as Tulare County was beginning the process of updating their general plan.

"People who live in these communities pay taxes to the County," says Diaz, who participated in public hearings in Visalia, the county seat. "And yet our communities don't have parks, our roads are riddled with potholes, and our houses have contaminated water.

In March, Tulare County released the latest draft of the Updated General Plan. The discriminatory language has been removed from the document and—in a verbal commitment to the Community Water Center—the Board of Supervisors said that efforts would be made to direct funding towards communities without adequate water or waste-water services.

Lack of Transparency at the local level

Water systems in unincorporated communities are managed by locally-elected, volunteer water boards. But these boards receive little support or oversight from the county. As a result, for many communities the impacts of water contamination are often made worse when water boards overcharge residents for their water, disseminate inaccurate information, or fail to notify residents when contaminants in the water supply exceed official health standards.

For example, the East Orosi Community Services District does not send a water bill to households, let alone adequate information about the quality of residents' tap water. Residents are expected to pay $57 every month and poor record-keeping can result in unexpected defaults, even as residents maintain that they've paid the bill.

"Last year, the water board told my compañera that they hadn't received any payments," says Diaz. "And when she asked for a statement to verify that claim, they didn't give her anything. They ended up billing her for $400."

In nearby Cutler, a predominantly Latino town of 5,000 people, the board did not notify residents when

contaminants in the water exceeded health standards for drinking. As a result, residents were exposed to high levels of DBCP, a pesticide that was banned in California in late 1970s but persists in groundwater supplies still today. Long-term exposure to DBCP has been associated with kidney damage, male sterility and various forms of cancer.

Jesús Quevedo, a longtime Cutler resident, says it took a lot of political organizing to pressure the water board to send out regular notifications about the quality of residents' tap water. Through an organization called Vecinos Unidos (neighbors united), Quevedo, Diaz, and other residents from Cutler and East Orosi mounted an effective political campaign targeting the Cutler water board. Three years ago in early 2007, the water board began to deliver water quality notices to Cutler residents.

"Now, when contaminant levels in the water pass the threshold in which it's not safe to drink, they have to warn us," says Quevedo, 76, who has lived in Cutler for more than 40 years and has worked as a farm worker. Quevedosays this victory also helped build political power for communities that have long been neglected and disenfranchised. But in a political landscape dominated by agricultural interests, this is not enough.

"The communities in Los Angeles and San Francisco have much more political power than we do," he says. "We need their help to pass strict laws that stop the problem of contamination."

For Jesus Quevedo, water contamination is not just about political advocacy and social justice; it is a matter of life and death. In June of 2008, Jesus Quevedo lost his son, José de Jesús, to leukemia, a cancer of the blood. Doctors said it was likely due to chronic exposure to various chemical pesticides, both in the field (where Jose was a farm worker) and at home. He was 50 years old.

Now Berta Diaz, a close friend of the family, helps Quevedo with household chores. Sitting in the dining room, she talks about a better future for children growing up in communities like Cutler and East Orosi.

"As mothers and fathers, we are fighting so that they (their children) can have a brighter future," she says. "I only want the best for them."

What you can do:

Find out what's in *your* water by calling your local water provider:

- San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC): (415) 554-3289
- East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD): (510) 763-1035
- **Support regional regulation to protect groundwater:** The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board (CVRWQCB) will be voting on regulations to protect groundwater from contamination by irrigated agriculture for the first time in history.
- Contact Community Water Center at (559) 733-0219 to find out how to get involved.