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Drinking water drought drowns rural residents

By Reggie Ellis

Updated: Thursday, April 15, 2010 1:37 PM PDT

Water is an essential element of life. But clean water is essential for healthy life. Once considered a basic human right in America, clean water is something that is not readily available to many residents of rural communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley.

For more than a decade, residents in rural Tulare County's Tooleville and Tonyville have had drinking water that is anything but. The groundwater being pumped to Tooleville residents has a high level of nitrates. Nitrates are known to cause 'blue baby' syndrome. If absorbed by a growing fetus, nitrates can be converted to nitrite, a natural inhibitor to the flow of oxygen in the blood stream. The chemical reaction causes shortness of breath and blueness of the skin. Life-long exposure for adults can cause spleen hemorrhaging.

Every three months, the water association must send out a bilingual flyer warning residents that children six months and younger can die within several weeks of ingesting the water and should not even be used to make juice or formula. Boiling the water doesn't help either; it only intensifies the concentration of nitrates after some of the water is evaporated. In 2007, nitrates in Tooleville's water measured at 48 parts per million (PPM), higher than the state's maximum contaminant level of 45 ppm.

In Tonyville, water cannot be pumped from the ground because of nitrates, so the community purchases water from the Friant-Kern Canal through the Lindsay-Strathmore Irrigation District. Unfortunately, the water from the canal has to be treated and has a high concentration of trihalomethanes, a combination of four chemicals that are byproducts of chlorinating water. Some studies have suggested that trihalomethanes may contribute to a small increase in the risk of bladder and colorectal cancers. Other investigations have found that trihalomethanes may be linked to heart, lung, kidney, liver, and central nervous system damage. And some studies have found possible links to reproductive problems, including miscarriage. Of the different trihalomethanes, dibromochloromethane has been most closely associated with cancer, followed in order by bromoform, chloroform, and bromodichloromethane. In 2009, trihalomethanes in Tonyville's water measured at 111 micrograms per liter, much higher than the state's maximum contaminant level of 80 micrograms per liter.

'This isn't a problem that can be dealt with on a case-by-case basis alone,' explained Susana De Anda, Coordinator of the AGUA coalition and Co-Executive Director of the Community Water Center, an environmental justice nonprofit based in Tulare County that focuses on community drinking water challenges. 'Tens of thousands of residents in the San Joaquin Valley have lacked access to safe drinking water in their homes and schools for years and continue to do so in 2010.

Last Thursday, the California Rural Legal Assistance Inc. filed an appeal on behalf of the AGUA coalition and other residents of unincorporated communities with contaminated drinking water to request that the California Department of Public Health Develop (CDPH) submit to the legislature a Safe Drinking Water Plan, as required under the state Safe Drinking Water Act.

Under the California Safe Drinking Water Act, state law requires that CDPH complete the plan every five years. The plan must include an analysis of California's overall drinking water quality, with the emphasis on water systems with fewer than 10,000 service connections and contaminated water sources, as well as recommendations on ways to improve water quality in those systems. The Plan must also include a five-year implementation program to improve the quality of drinking water in California. Contrary to this legislative mandate, CDPH has not submitted the plan to the state since 1993.

'Currently the State does not even have a comprehensive list of all the communities that are suffering from contaminated drinking water,' said Kara Brodfuehrer, an attorney with the California Rural Legal Assistance Inc. 'This plan would provide them with this information.' Frustrated by the lack of action to solve the region's growing drinking water crisis, residents from communities that have been without safe water for over a decade hoped that the plan would help highlight the persistent lack of safe water in many small communities and force that state to invest in solving it.

'When agencies like this fail to do what they are supposed to do, it tells us that our issue is not a priority for the state, it feels like our problems are invisible when there is no plan

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to solve the problems or even proposed recommendations on how to solve it ñ but we know the problem is real because we live it every day,' said Maria Herrera, AGUA member.

On behalf of these residents, California Rural Legal Assistance filed a writ of mandate against the CDPH to prepare the state mandated Safe Drinking Water Plan. However, citing budgetary limitations, a state court in Fresno County ruled on Feb. 5 that the CDPH does not have to prepare the plan. Plaintiffs are appealing this decision.

'Our water is still contaminated, we are in debt, and now we are facing yet another rate increase,' said Juventino Gonzalez, a petitioner in the case and current resident of Lanare, Calif. in Fresno County. Lanare's drinking water is contaminated with high levels of arsenic and residents currently pay \$46 a month for water they cannot drink. The community received over \$1.3 million in Federal funding to construct an arsenic treatment plant between 2002 and 2007. However, due to the high costs of arsenic treatment, the community incurred extreme debt, and was forced to turn the plant off 6 months after it started operating.

Advocates argue that had CDPH completed the Safe Drinking Water Plan, as mandated by the state law, state and local officials would have known that the arsenic treatment plant was not a feasible way of delivering clean water to small communities such as Lanare, and would have been able to identify more cost effective and viable treatment options.

'If we had access to this information ahead of time everything would be different,' said Gonzalez.

AGUA, which stands for La Asociacion de la Gente Unida por el Agua (The Association of People United for Water), is a coalition of more than 17 communities with contaminated water sources including youth and five nonprofit organizations in the San Joaquin Valley working to secure safe, clean and affordable drinking water.

'We need to demand that the state agency does its job and develops this plan to help ensure that every Californian has access to clean and safe drinking water once and for all,' De Anda said.

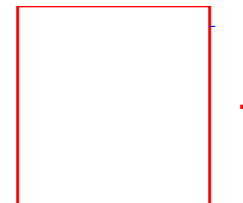
For more information on AGUA, call Maria Herrera or Susana De Anda at the Community Water Alliance in Tulare, 733-0219.

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Nasdaq	2456.42
↓ 24.84	1.00%
S&P 500	1186.25
↓ 5.88	0.49%
Russell 2K	704.15
↓ 10.47	1.47%
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