

## Editorial: Clean water should be a basic right

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Most Californians, and most Americans, take for granted the most elemental natural resource for their survival — water.

Turn on the tap, there it is: clean, safe, potable and dependable, and as much as you want.

But not everywhere. Not in Seville, for instance. And not in many other places in the Valley. Those places are more like Third World locations, where people live with contaminated, sometimes filthy water, where they must fetch water from miles away.

That's what many people must do in Seville. They can't drink the water from their faucets. It's poison, contaminated with nitrates, arsenic, heavy metals and other carcinogens. In places such as Seville, Kettleman City, Earlimart and Alpaugh, people develop health problems such as cancer, and they learn not to use their water for anything before boiling it. They get into a routine of importing their drinking water from machines miles away.

Today in Seville, a number of residents will hold a news conference to emphasize the plight of their community. The news is inspired by two children who recently appeared on a television program on Nickelodeon and explained how their water quality was so poor, it was like the water in Bangladesh or the African bush or other places most Americans would associate with backward, undeveloped countries.

But it's not only in backward countries that this problem persists. Poor water quality — so bad it is poisonous — has been a problem in our Valley for generations. The problem has been well-known for all that time.

The water problems for places such as Seville are easily explained. Small, rural communities are susceptible. They don't have the money to build water treatment plants. They don't have the political clout to get help. They lack the government structure to effect change. Their residents lack a voice: Many are new or illegal immigrants, non-English-speaking, without much formal education.

Among the advocates for people such as these is the Community Water Center, centered in Visalia but working in many places in the Valley. The Community Water Center is advocating for the people in Seville.

"Safe drinking water is a human right," said Susana De Anda, co-executive director of the Community Water Center in Visalia.

De Anda notes that Seville's residents, and many others in the Valley, are not only victimized through the health and quality of life. They are being economically punished. Seville's residents pay twice for their water: They pay for the contaminated water that comes into their homes, then they pay a premium for bottled water for drinking that they must import from elsewhere.

The point is there are many ways these folks are being victimized.

The Community Water Center is calling on Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Valley's congressional representatives to provide direct emergency funding to communities without safe drinking water as well as long-term solutions.

We reiterate that plea. It is a cruel anachronism of life in the Central Valley that water, measured in acre-feet, or hundreds of thousands of gallons, is discussed, analyzed, fought over, bought and sold, transported and stored, and used to help feed the

world, yet children in places such as Seville are made ill by the water that comes into their homes.

This is a hugely complicated problem that requires solutions on a macro scale, including reversing decades of contamination of groundwater wells from sewage, pesticides and fertilizer, the effects of irrigation and the drainage problems created by urbanization. There is plenty of blame to go around, too.

But how can our society claim to be civilized communities while we continue to allow conditions in our own backyard that we find nauseating in other countries?

Actions by the governor and our elected leaders might be a start. This will also require the kind of all-out commitment that the Greatest Generation waged in world war.

No one should have to live in conditions where the basic life-giving element is poisonous. With wide enough commitment from our entire society, this situation can be changed so that the people of Seville and elsewhere can rely on the safety of a resource the rest of us take for granted — our water.