

Drought-hit US town learns to live without water

October 16 2014, by Veronique Dupont



Mario Garcia fills buckets with non-potable water from a tank set up in front of the Doyle Colony Fire Station in Porterville, California, on September 4, 2014

In front of the local fire station, Pete Rodriguez stands next to his pick-up truck, filling about a dozen buckets from a vast tank.

He hurries, because another car is waiting behind him.

Rodriquez is one of hundreds of residents and business people in the small town of Porterville, in California's normally verdant Central Valley, who have no running water and are having to re-think how they live.

"I have two buckets near the toilet, one next to the shower," he told AFP.

Porterville, at the heart of what is known as America's food basket, is suffering from one of California's worst droughts in up to a century.

"In Tulare County we have at least 430 homes without running water because their water wells dried out," said Andrew Lockman, head of the county's emergency management center.

"I don't think there is a precedent in the state of California," he added, saying: "These people have no water for bathing, cooking, flushing toilets. It is a big public health issue."

Outside of the big towns, many homes in the region are dependent on water from private wells, which are now running dry after three years of drought which has exhausted underground water supplies, or aquifers.

In the long term the region needs structural change including a centralized water supply system. But that will take years and cost tens of millions of dollars to build.

In the meantime authorities can only offer stop-gap measures.



A footbridge spans a completely dry river bed, in Porterville, California, on September 4, 2014

Third World, or America?

So they have installed two large tanks in town, including the one outside the fire station, filled with non-drinkable water, while supplying bottles of potable water to homes without any.

To deliver the bottles they are relying on volunteers like Donna Johnson, a 71-year-old retired former social worker with gray hair and turquoise eyes, in her pickup truck with leopard-skin interior.

"I was really concerned that some people could get sick," she told AFP driving round town to help families, some with babies or pensioners who can't drive themselves.

Most don't have the \$10-20,000 needed to drill a new well. "There's a lot of people out there that don't have the income (or) they are too proud. Some of them don't speak English" or don't have legal documentation, she added.

"Some of us were in disbelief because you only run out of water in Third World countries. It was like 'It doesn't happen in America.

"Well it does happen in America," she said.

Her first stop is Edy the Mexican mechanic. "I have an 18-month-old nephew. Giving him a bath is really complicated," he said, happily receiving a few cases of water bottles from Johnson.



Jane Tapia (L) holds 1-year-old Melody in front of their home as they wait for a delivery of drinking water, in Porterville, California, on September 4, 2014

A little further, in a quiet street next to what used to be a river but now looks like a brush-covered road, Vietnam War veteran Jessie Coates is doing his washing in the yard.

He uses a large stick to beat and stir the washing, in the old fashioned way. The dishes wait in another bowl, on the ground nearby.

Inside his modest home, the kitchen taps have been removed, and a large water bottle takes pride of place in the sink.

"It kills my arms" to carry it, says Coates, wearing an "I love USA" T-shirt.

Johnson explains that even wealthier families are affected. They have enough money for a new well, but they can't find someone to drill it: there is an 18-month waiting list for qualified workmen.

Edy, who has lived in California for 18 ans, is thinking of closing up shop to move somewhere else.

But a lot of home, or business-owners, are blocked by the same problem: they can't sell their property without running [water](#).

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