

Stanislaus homes with tainted wells start getting free bottled water. How to qualify

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Free bottled water has begun to arrive at homes with nitrate-tainted wells in parts of Stanislaus and Merced counties.

The ambitious effort, funded by farmers and other parties, launched the week of May 10 with free testing of residential wells. Those that exceeded the nitrate threshold can start getting the 5-gallon jugs about 17 to 21 days later.

That's why Alhambra driver Tim Halloran was out at a home on West Harding Road near Turlock on Friday afternoon. He delivered two jugs for one of the first clients of the program and expects to do the same there twice a month.

"It will save them going to the store and buying a bunch of bottles," Halloran said. The recipient declined to comment to The Modesto Bee.

Alhambra has a contract with the Valley Water Collaborative, formed last year to deal with nitrate in drinking water. Its members include farmers, food processors, city sewage systems and other entities whose land historically contributed to the problem.

The program operates under the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board. It is bounded by the Stanislaus River on the north, the San Joaquin River on the west, the Merced River on the south, and the base of the Sierra Nevada on the east.

NITRATE AFFECTS OXYGEN UPTAKE

Ingesting too much nitrate can interfere with the blood's uptake of oxygen, especially for newborns and pregnant women.

The substance comes from livestock manure, synthetic fertilizer and other sources. They are highly regulated now, but past practices left dangerous levels in much of the Valley.

The free bottled water will be provided while long-term solutions are pursued, such as connecting to public water systems and improving farm practices.

An [interactive map](#) can help residents see if they are eligible for the program. They qualify if the well test finds at least 10 parts per million of nitrate. A reading between eight and 10 ppm will get them another free test in a year.

GeoAnalytical, a laboratory based in Turlock, is handling the testing.

Well owners can choose to have water jugs delivered or to have free installation and maintenance of under-the-sink filters. Next year could bring water-filling kiosks at shopping centers and other locations if demand merits.

NOT FOR CITY WATER CUSTOMERS

The program is not for customers of city water systems, which already treat for nitrate or have retired problem wells. This was a common misconception after the [initial announcement in April](#), said Parry Klassen, executive director of the collaborative.

Its map shows extensive nitrate hazards generally west of Highway 99 from Salida to Delhi. Another large zone stretches north, east and south of Turlock. Smaller hot spots are near Oakdale, Waterford and east Modesto.

The program is open to people of any income, and to renters as well as homeowners.

About 150 homes had applied as of Thursday. The collaborative estimates that up to 42,000 people could qualify for the program. It has a budget of about \$1 million this year, based on about 30% of them taking part, but it could grow.

Environmental leaders told The Modesto Bee in April that they support the bottled water effort. They cautioned that its success will depend on outreach, including to Spanish speakers.

The groups also would like to see the program cover pollutants other than nitrate. And they urge a quicker timeline for better farming practices than the 35 years allowed by the regional board.

COLLEGE STUDENTS HELP SPREAD WORD

The collaborative has spread the word via postcards and social media. In June, it plans to set up displays at food distribution sites, farmers markets and other events as COVID-10 rules ease. It has hired students from Modesto Junior College and California State University, Stanislaus, to help.

The collaborative board is chaired by Alan Reynolds, who oversees Valley vineyards for E.&J. Gallo Winery of Modesto.

“This is an enormous effort we are undertaking,” he said in a news release. “The VWC board and the participating industries and municipalities are committed to collaboration to ensure access to safe drinking water for impacted communities, and that the (water board) requirements are met as cost effectively as possible.”

More information is at www.valleywaterc.org or 209-750-3867.



Alhambra driver Tim Halloran delivers free water to a home just south of Turlock, CA, on Friday, May 28, 2021. The jugs are being provided to homes with hazardous nitrate levels in their wells under a new program funded by farmers and other parties. JOHN HOLLAND

