

## **Draft Op-Ed for placement in Sacramento media (Cal Matters or Sac Bee).**

Rural Central Valley residents, many living in areas where contaminants threaten their wells, are finally getting help securing safe drinking water. Addressing the historical nitrate problems in the Central Valley is a complicated challenge, but solutions forged through state regulation and collaborative public-private partnerships are starting to take shape and hold promise for the future.

New coalitions and nonprofits are performing well tests and delivering free bottled water to homes struggling with tainted well water. At the same time, these groups are cooperatively planning for long-term solutions in affected areas of Merced, Stanislaus, Fresno, Tulare, Kern, Kings, and Madera counties through new programs to ensure safe drinking water and begin to clean up historically polluted aquifers.

These are positive developments, but just the beginning. In the months and years to come, it will take partnerships, outreach, and trust-building to overcome challenges inherent in this effort, including skepticism from some households about unfamiliar organizations offering something that might seem too good to be true—free well testing and, where needed, free water deliveries.

The good news is that it is not only true, but it is already happening – hundreds of families are already receiving free, safe drinking water, with more to come.

The Central Valley's nitrate problem has been decades in the making. Nitrate is a groundwater contaminant that can pose serious health impacts if consumed at high levels. Common sources include fertilizers, livestock waste, and septic systems. In rural and agricultural areas, nitrate typically travels through soil to reach groundwater, and is difficult to abate.

In 2018, the Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board, which is responsible for regulating water pollutants, established a new Nitrate Control Program to provide safe drinking water as quickly as possible to impacted households, manage nitrate discharges long-term, and clean groundwater where feasible. Regulated dischargers under the program include owners and operators of irrigated cropland, dairies, ranchers, poultry producers, food processors, wineries, and municipalities.

The program identified six Priority 1 groundwater basins, where most dischargers have chosen to join new “management zones” in which they work together to deliver safe drinking water to adversely affected residents, while also developing long-term nitrate management plans. Longer term solutions will include improving farming practices, onsite treatment, and infrastructure enhancements such as connecting rural residents to municipal water lines already providing safe drinking water.

Despite the pandemic, the work has pushed forward. In the Modesto and Turlock subbasins, for example, dischargers formed the Valley Water Collaborative, a nonprofit governing the management zone covering these basins. Management zones also have been established in the other Priority 1 basins, and new management zones are beginning to form in other areas.

In many places, residents have been buying bottled water for years to serve their homes. A key obligation within the new management zones is identifying populations that need clean drinking water delivery. Program outreach has been extensive through mailings, home visits, schools, nonprofits, food drives, farmers markets, COVID-19 vaccination fairs, social media, and virtual meetings.

The program's free bottled water delivery began in May. Free well testing is the first step: eligible residents qualify if tests show their well water has at least 10 parts per million of nitrate. Slightly lower well readings enable a free test the following year. Funding for the program—estimated at several million dollars annually—comes from assessments on dischargers.

Since May, more than 500 wells have been tested, with three out of five exceeding the nitrate standard. More than 300 households are now receiving free bottled water deliveries. As an alternative, they also can opt for free installation and maintenance of under-sink filters. In addition, management zones are installing water filling stations in rural areas to increase access.

As the program continues to evolve, many more people throughout the Central Valley may qualify for delivery of free bottled water while long-term solutions are developed to provide reliable access to safe drinking water.

It is heartening to see a robust partnership of government, businesses, and communities coming together to deliver solutions to a longstanding problem. As active participants, we look forward to continued partnership with all of those involved to achieve the program's important near-term and long-term goals.