



A Million Californians don't have clean drinking water. Where do they live?

By Harriet Blair Rowan, California Healthline

- *Mostly in the Central Valley, especially Kern County*
- *“We’re going to feel like the rich who go around with clean water, right?”*

Julia Mendoza wants the tap water she pays for to be clean and safe, but it hasn't been for nearly a decade.

“If we want clean water for bathing, that’s not for us,” she said in Spanish. “That’s for rich cities, not for us.”

Ms. Mendoza, 42, and her family live in Cantua Creek in western Fresno County, a town of about 100 homes that is inextricably tied to the farmland surrounding it.

The agricultural industry provides jobs — but also brings environmental fallout from the high-intensity farming practices that dominate the Central Valley.

Ms. Mendoza and other Cantua Creek residents don't drink or cook with the water that runs from their taps, which is contaminated with potentially harmful chemical compounds. But they still pay about \$75 a month for it because they need water for bathing and for washing dishes and clothes.

They are among nearly 1 million people in California who are advised not to drink tap water because state regulators say their local water authority doesn't meet clean water standards. Experts estimate that another million people rely on unsafe water from small wells that aren't tested and tracked as carefully by the State Water Resources Control Board.

A California Healthline analysis of data from the board revealed that in 12 California counties more than 10 percent of residents have unsafe tap water, including San Joaquin, Kern and San Benito. In rural Alpine County on the Nevada border, more than half of its 1,200 residents don't have safe water, the worst rate in the state. Only 17 of California's 58 counties have local water systems that all comply with state and federal drinking water standards.

In Fresno County, where Ms. Mendoza lives, 6.6 percent of residents — or about 63,700 — don't have clean drinking water, the analysis found.

The data does not include schools, community water systems that serve fewer than 10 homes, or households that rely on private wells.

Here are where the other Central Valley counties fall on the rate of a lack of clean drinking water to county population, followed by the total of people in the county who are affected:

- Kern County, 233 residents per 1,000; total of 213,551
- Kings County, 190.6/1,000; total of 29,292
- Tulare County, 208/1,000; total of 99,654
- Fresno County, 62.5/1,000; total of 63,650
- Madera County, 42.1/1,000; total of 6,724
- Merced County, 226.4/1,000; total of 64,055
- Stanislaus County, 284.5/1,000; total of 159,013
- San Joaquin County, 109.4/1,000; total of 84,280
- Sacramento County, 0.4/1,000; total of 620
- Yolo County, 1/4/1,000; total of 314
- Yuba County, 0.0/1,000; total of 0
- Butte County, 0.1/1,000; total of 12

As part of the 2019-20 state budget deal, which awaits approval from Gov. Gavin Newsom, lawmakers pledged \$130 million each year, most of it redirected from cap-and-trade credits on greenhouse gas emissions, to help these communities get clean water.

The fund will pay for clean water projects such as upgrading, replacing and consolidating water systems. Additional legislation is likely to be passed in the coming weeks to clarify how the money will be used.

The deal is the culmination of years of negotiations among community groups, environmental organizations, water authorities and lawmakers. Mr. Newsom originally proposed a new water tax on all Californians to fund the water projects but negotiated the deal to use cap-and-trade funding with Democratic legislators who did not support the tax.

Testing has shown unsafe levels of contaminants like arsenic and nitrates in 277 community water systems across the state.

“You can have unsafe water anywhere,” said Jennifer Clary, the California water programs manager for Clean Water Action, an environmental advocacy group. “But typically it’s in low-income communities of color in a rural area.”

Ms. Clary said small communities like Cantua Creek “lack the economies of scale to fund water system upgrades,” and this new money could change that.

Many local water systems have been unable to come up with the money for improvements. Those that have

upgraded often pass those costs to customers in the form of higher water bills that many residents struggle to pay.

Even with the new state fund, “it will take several years to take care of this,” Ms. Clary said.

In Cantua Creek, existing state funding helps some residents get 5-gallon jugs of clean water each month, but they say that’s not enough for drinking and cooking, especially in the summer.

But Ms. Mendoza and other residents are optimistic that after years of advocating for their community, they could be getting clean tap water soon.

“We’re going to feel like the rich who go around with clean water, right?” she said.

Methodology:

California Healthline used a data set from the California State Water Resources Control Board for community water systems that serve 10 or more homes and are found to be out of compliance with clean drinking water standards. The board estimates the number of residents using water from each of those community water systems. We analyzed those populations by county and calculated an estimated percent of people affected. The board also publishes data on school water systems that are out of

compliance, but we excluded that data to avoid duplicating the number of residents affected in each county. The data does not include people who are connected to water systems that serve fewer than 10 homes or people who use private wells.

This story was produced by Kaiser Health News, an editorially independent program of the Kaiser Family Foundation. It was edited to conform to CVBT style.

About the writer

Harriet Blair Rowan, Digital Reporter for California Healthline, is an investigative and data journalist. She has done research and reporting for the Center for Investigative Reporting, the Investigative Reporting Program at the University of California-Berkeley and the East Bay Times. She received her master's degree from the UC-Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism and is based in San Francisco.