

The California drought: A tale of two cities

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Around the state of California thousands of working class residents have lost access to water. The private wells of impoverished rural communities are drying out, forcing residents to struggle to perform the most basic tasks of life.

Since the beginning of August, the percentage of the state falling under “exceptional” or “extreme” drought, according to the US Drought Monitor, has held at 81.92 percent. The entire state remains categorized as undergoing some stage of drought conditions.

In Tulare County, 150 miles north of Los Angeles, over 1,000 people in the city of East Porterville have entirely lost access to running water. The residents of this city rely on 320 private wells that have now dried up as the groundwater sinks.

Tulare, one of the poorest counties in the state, had a per capita income of \$17,986 in 2011; 24.8 percent of the county was below the poverty line in 2012. The county is home to many migrant workers who work in California’s multibillion-dollar agriculture industry.

Tony Alvarez, 62-year-old father of five, told *Fox 40*, “At first, it was dread that came over us. What are we going to do? We are a low-income family. Things are hard enough as it is, trying to get everybody to school and get everybody ready.”

The only available water in the city is a storage tank at the fire station. Residents routinely visit it to get enough water to flush the toilet, clean themselves, cook or do the dishes.

Horrified by the conditions, a 72-year-old woman, Donna Johnson, took out a personal loan and began buying water and bringing it to her neighbors. She told *Reuters*, “I saw all these people who couldn’t take a shower: kids, pregnant women ... Nobody realizes what it’s like if you feel grimy every day. You worry about sending your kids to school because they’re going to be dirty.” Johnson’s own tap has been dry since June.

After Johnson’s remarkable effort was reported on,

first in the *Fresno Bee* and then the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times*, the county government and some aid organizations began bringing in donated water. Several nonprofits, including the Girl Scouts, have stepped in to donate water to residents. The *Fresno Bee* reports, however, that despite the recent aid, “More water donations [are] needed.”

Mike Ennis, in charge of East Porterville water services, said that a long-term solution would be to connect East Porterville to Porterville’s water system, but estimates that this project would cost \$20 million or more and take at least five years to complete, money and time the residents do not have.

So far, the county has spent \$30,000 on the delivery of bottled drinking water. Tulare County officials hope that the state will reimburse them for the \$30,000 spent on water so far.

One hundred fifty miles southwest of East Porterville sits another town with similar physical limitations. The coastal city of Montecito, in Santa Barbara County, rests comfortably on top of the smallest aquifer along California’s Central Coast.

The city has started to demand cutbacks and levy fines on residents in an attempt to limit water usage to keep the aquifer from going dry. Money, however, is not an issue for many of Montecito’s residents, where per capita income was \$75,716 in 2012.

Billionaire Oprah Winfrey, for instance, owns a 42-acre mega-mansion in Montecito complete with a private lake, a pool and acre upon acre of lush vegetation. The palatial estate, known as “The Promised Land”, is just one of her seven known residences.

Ann Bardach covers the manner in which this wealthy enclave is weathering the drought in *Politico Magazine*. Montecito Water District manager claims that Winfrey is the “poster child” for the water conservation effort. Indeed, Winfrey, the most

responsible of the bunch, has cut her personal city water bill to a little under \$62,500, more than double what the average Californian makes in a year. This sum, however, does not include costs for the water that she privately trucks in.

According to Bardach, in the single month of May, 837 residents of the city paid \$532,000 in penalties for using, collectively, an excess of 13 million gallons of water in Montecito. Bardach notes that Pat Nesbitt, the CEO of Windsor Capital and majority owner of the Embassy Suites hotel chain, is the largest consumer of water. She writes that he “has long sought to convince local officials that his polo field, which is part of his 20-acre estate, is entitled to a discounted agricultural water rate.” Nesbitt has sued twice trying to get his way.

Montecito is home to other rich and famous individuals, among them: Eric Shmidt of Google, hedge fund manager Warren Buffett’s partner Charlie Munger, Beanie Babies tycoon Ty Warner, entertainment mogul Tom Freston, and Hollywood celebrities including Ellen DeGeneres, George Lucas, Rob Lowe and many more. Bob Hazard, the ex-CEO of Choice Hotels, writes in the *Montecito Journal* that residents may be “paying as much as \$15,000 a month for trucked-in water.” Reportedly, 5,000-gallon water tankers have become a common site in the area.

One private home in April went over its allotment and incurred a \$30,000 fine for using an extra 750,000 gallons on top of whatever that home’s usual use is. To draw a parallel, in East Porterville, the county has been handing out emergency water supplies for thousands of people over the past few months that have in total cost \$30,000.

Shockingly the average person in East Porterville is receiving about 16 gallons of water a month in emergency aid from the county while a single residence in Montecito uses 750,000 gallons of *excess* water beyond their monthly allotment. The excess water consumed by a single Montecito resident in a month is enough to provide the emergency water aid to the entirety of East Porterville for several years.



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