

No Solutions for Rural Water Pollution Problem

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Sam Hodgson

Maria Amaya, owner of Angelo's Beauty Salon in Campo, holds up a glass of tap water. Amaya only drinks bottled water in Campo because of concerns about contamination. "They say it's drinkable, but I don't drink it," she says.

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By CLAIRE TRAGESER

When Sarmed Badri makes coffee in his store, he only uses bottled water.

He refuses to drink tap water during his long shifts at Oak Shores Liquor & Grocery in Lake Morena Village, and he won't let his customers drink it either. Since the Iraqi native bought the store in East County in 2008, he's taken a gallon of water from its shelves every other day, at a cost of \$25 a month.

"I don't even give it out when customers ask for a glass from the faucet," he said. "I don't want that liability, to be responsible for them."

Few ever ask. Residents throughout the rural area near Morena Reservoir said they also buy their water bottled. Five miles down the road in Campo, Maria Amaya, owner of Angelo's Beauty Salon, is so afraid of the water at work that she lugs plastic jugs of water from her home.

"They say it's drinkable, but I don't drink it," she said. "I've just heard too much, so I don't even want to try it."

Despite halting efforts to improve water quality affected by pollution in rural areas like Campo and Lake Morena Village, residents are still fearful. And with reason: A state law passed in 2000 that requires better regulation of septic systems, a major source of the water contamination, has yet to be implemented.

A decade after the first attempts to solve these water pollution problems, the solution still looks a lot like the water that runs from Badri's tap: murky.

Water contamination isn't isolated to Lake Morena Village and Campo. Thirty of the 75 water systems that serve every city, home and business in San Diego County have had at least one problem since 1998, according to U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports. But none has had more than Lake Morena Oak Shores Mutual Water Co., a nonprofit whose water system serves about 700 people.

Between 1998 and 2007, the company reported 12 different health violations for exceeding state and federally prescribed limits for nitrates and coliform bacteria. Nitrates, which are found in fertilizer and human and animal waste, can interfere with the blood's ability to carry oxygen, especially in the elderly and young children. Coliform bacteria signal the possible presence of human or animal feces, which can carry hepatitis A, salmonella, poliovirus, rotavirus or E. coli.

Although none of those bugs have been found in Lake Morena Village's water, its residents say they receive "boil water" alerts once or twice a year after coliform violations. Sharon Ehrlich, a village resident, said that's done little to build her trust. Even the company warns pregnant women, babies, the elderly and sick to avoid drinking its water.

What Lurks in the Groundwater

Drive through the winding roads around Lake Morena Village and one possible contamination source is easy to see. Many houses have fenced-in horses loitering on their front lawns. Nitrates and coliform bacteria in the waste from these horses, as well as cattle and other animals, can seep into the groundwater supply, said Marylynn Yates, an environmental microbiology professor at the University of California, Riverside.

A 2002 county assessment of the water sources for Lake Morena Oak Shores points to another less visible cause: septic systems. The assessment found that the village's water is most vulnerable to contamination from the area's high density of septic systems -- more than one per acre.

In rural areas like Lake Morena Village, residents use septic systems because their houses are spaced far apart, making a community sewer system too expensive. When someone with a septic system flushes the toilet or pours water down the drain, the water flows into a large tank -- typically holding about 1,000 gallons -- buried in the yard. Solids sink to the bottom, leaving cleaner water to flow out into a series of perforated pipes, where it is slowly absorbed and filtered by the ground's soil. Contaminated water can sometimes seep into the groundwater below.

"When regulations for septic tanks were first set up, they were more meant to ensure that the wastewater wouldn't pond on the surface," Yates said. "They weren't as concerned with groundwater contamination as they are today."

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