

RURAL ACCESS TO WELLS & WATER

In a typical year, the Central Valley uses groundwater to meet 30% of its water needs. During droughts, municipalities and agriculture can increase their usage, to the detriment of those who rely on small, shallow wells.

“YOU WANT TO KNOW WHAT IT’S LIKE TO LIVE WITHOUT WATER? TURN OFF YOUR WATER FOR A WEEK. THAT’S THE ONLY WAY YOU WILL KNOW...” – Yolanda Serrato, East Porterville resident

As many as two million wells tap into the Golden State’s groundwater. These wells can be hand-dug, shallow designs, or large systems drawing from far underground. During the 2011-2016 drought, farmers and cities pulled more water than usual from these deep aquifers. Subsequently, many shallow wells ran completely dry.

This was the case for East Porterville, an unincorporated Tulare County community of about 7,000 people, mostly poor Latinx farm workers. East Porterville is one of the 525 densely-populated, low-income unincorporated communities in the San Joaquin Valley. In 2015, about 310,000 Californians called these communities home. Of these residents, 65% were people of color and 64% were low-income.

When East Porterville’s 1,000 private wells began to dry up, much of the town was left without safe drinking water. In contrast, the nearby City of Porterville continued to supply its 60,000

residents with clean water. This disparity dates back to the county’s 1971 general plan, when officials laid out a strategy to “starve out” 15 unincorporated communities: “...non-viable communities would, as a consequence of withholding major public facilities such as sewer and water systems, enter a process of long term, natural decline as residents depart.”

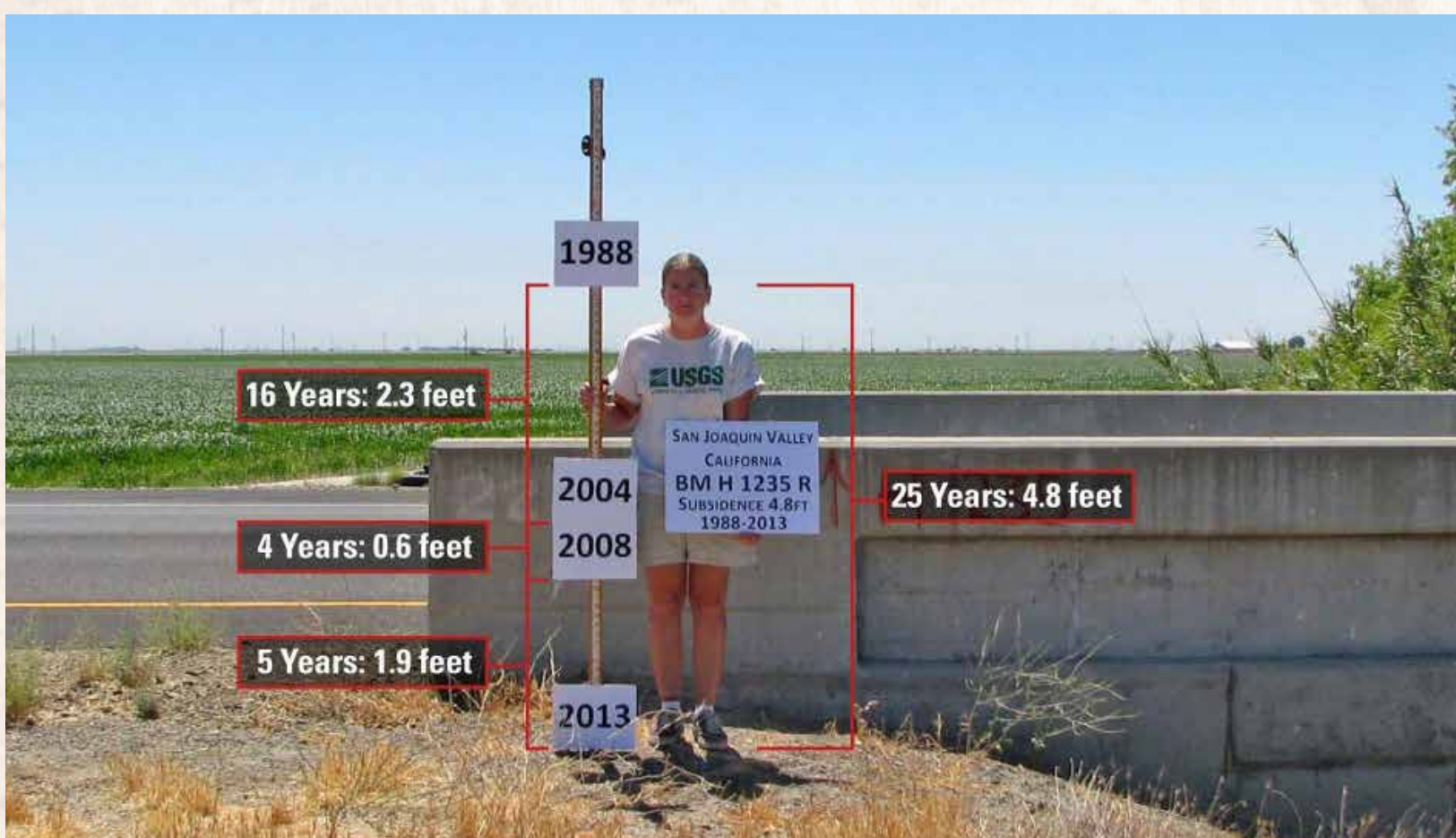
Nonprofits and government agencies worked together to bring water to East Porterville. When the \$35 million East

Porterville Water Supply Project was approved, the City began to add East Porterville households to Porterville’s water system.

New monthly water bills negatively impacted some residents. Others were afraid to drink the water because of high concentrations of nitrates (officials state there are no issues with the drinking water). But for most, the project provides a long-term solution for weathering future droughts, and serves as a model for ensuring equitable access to water for other unincorporated communities.



Volunteers Ruben Perez, left, and Donna Johnson of East Porterville fill barrels with non-potable water to deliver to fellow residents, June 2015. Silvia Flores/Fresno Bee.



In 25 years, parts of the Central Valley floor have sunk up to 5 feet. The main cause of land subsidence (the sinking of earth’s surface) in California is groundwater pumping. The effects of subsidence include damage to buildings and infrastructure, increased flood risk in low-lying areas, and lasting damage to groundwater aquifers and aquatic ecosystems. This photo shows land subsidence in Fresno between 1988 and 2013. Courtesy Water Education Foundation.