

All Gone

May 15, 2015 8:53 AM
www.Fusion.net

May 15, 2015 8:53 AM
by [Rob Wile](#)

<http://fusion.net/story/135296/poor-californians-say-almond-growers-are-sucking-the-drinking-water-from-right-beneath-their-feet/>



Poor Californians say almond growers are sucking the drinking water from right beneath their feet

One day two years ago, Elaine Moore went to turn on her water faucet, and out came sand.

Despite the state's having been in its second year of severe drought, the Fairmead, California, resident and farmer had until that point experienced no problems with accessing her water.

But Fairmead is heavy with large almond farms, and the farms were getting larger. To get at adequate water supplies to irrigate almond trees, deep wells must be dug — 1,000 feet or more. When that happens, shallower wells like hers can get instantly drained away.

“It just kind of seemed all at once,” she told Fusion.

Moore is lucky. She and her husband could afford to dig a new well after their existing ones went dry — ironically, thanks to revenue from almonds, which are the only crops that fetch a high enough price for them to live off of.

But 40 or so residents in the area about an hour north of Fresno have now been going without their own water supplies for almost the entirety of the drought, and more are added to their ranks each year.

All Gone

May 15, 2015 8:53 AM
www.Fusion.net

There remains considerable debate about the role water-intensive crops have played in exacerbating the state's unprecedented dry spell, and should play in making sure its impact is felt equally.

But Fairmead and areas like it seem to represent the most acute examples of the unintended consequences of unfettered agricultural expansion.

"I understand they have the right to grow and make a living, but people who had private wells, it's just sucking the water from under them," said Barbara Nelson, the head of Fairmead Community and Friends, a community group representing the affected residents.

Besides having her own water supply, Moore is also unique in that she is white. Madera County, in which Fairmead sits, was settled by members of the Great Migration who headed west instead of north to recreate their rural lifestyles. Many of their children and grandchildren live on fixed incomes, and so are getting hit hardest.

As NPR's Ezra David Romero [reported recently](#), Lawyer Cooper, whose family moved to the area in the 1940s, and his wife Annie have been without water since last June when, they say, their private well dried up after an almond farmer began drilling a well across the street from their country home.

"The next hour so, that water was gone," Annie Cooper said. "We've been without it ever since."

It's not clear which farmers are responsible. Moore said the Russell Harris Family farm — website TheAlmondCompany.com — was the one closest to her plots. Company officials did not respond to requests for comment.

Anja Raudabaugh, executive director of the Madera County Farm Bureau, said the bureau's members are getting hit by the drought themselves, having been forced to forego all new plantings because of the drought. She also says they've dug just one new well in the past two years.

But she says they have "have endeavored [to] recognize they are part of the issue," and that for several months last year they organized a "very expensive" campaign on their own volition to furnish affected homes with water supplies.

They stopped once the county announced it had received a grant to connect affected homes to the county's water district that are in close enough proximity to the system to do so. The county and state are also providing emergency relief in the form of water tanks and bottled water, but it's not much — something Madera County community and economic development coordinator Norman Alinder acknowledges.

All Gone

May 15, 2015 8:53 AM
www.Fusion.net



- [Twitter Tweet](#)
- [Facebook Share](#)
- [Pinterest Pin It](#)

Fairmead Community and Friends

“These folks are self reliant, that’s why they want to be there,” he said. “It’s a bit of an adjustment for us as a county to provide basic services like water to folks who specifically don’t want to be in the [area covered by] the water district.”

The measures Fairmead residents of all ethnicities must now take to conserve water make the actions being by the majority of state residents, like letting lawns go fallow, seem like an afterthought.

Pat Kennedy moved to Fairmead in January hoping to enjoy small-town, country life. She now admits she vastly underestimated the drought conditions the area was facing. She can’t use the dishwasher or the washing machine, and can only flush the toilet twice a day.

“I wash dishes by hand, then I use that water to put in the toilet tank so I don’t have to use drinking water,” she said.

Joseph Little, a disabled Hispanic man who lives with three other members of his family in a mobile home, says he can’t take showers for longer than three minutes.

“It’s survival,” he said.

Nelson says the government relief they are getting now amounts to a temporary solution.

Until the money is found to dig new wells, she said, the community will be completely dependent on the county and state.

“It’s a band aid,” she said.

Moore fears that eventually there will be nothing but megafarms left.

“I’ve got great-grand babies,” she said. “My husband bought the original property in high school. Are we going to have a legacy?”

END