

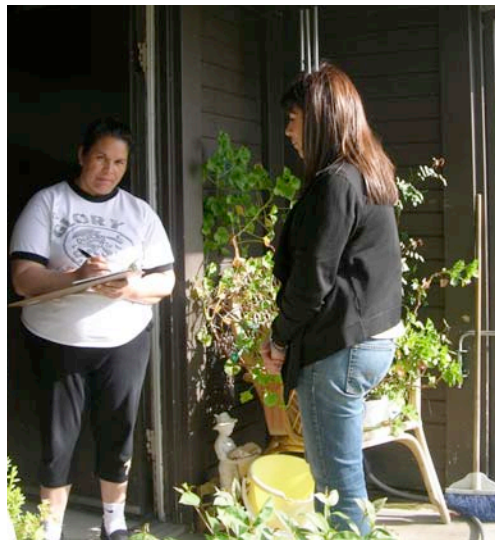
Thornton: A story of neglect

Contaminant of Concern: Manganese

The Problem: Thornton gets its drinking water from two wells, both of which contain manganese at levels well above the drinking water standard. While manganese at low levels provides an important dietary supplement, excessive amounts can cause iron deficiency and neurological problems. In addition, the brown water stains clothes, sinks and tubs.

About the Community: Thornton is an unincorporated community of about 1,000 residents in northern San Joaquin County. The community is home to a large public housing development populated mostly by farmworkers and their families. These residents are renters and do not pay a separate water bill.

The community is served by the San Joaquin County Utilities Maintenance District, a division of the Public Works Department. The community has no local water board; the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors has the responsibility to oversee their water system. Most residents are unaware of this, and tend to address complaints to local representatives, including the local housing authority management, who may or may not be able to assist them.



Organizer Virginia Madueno surveys community members about their water

The Solution: Manganese is a secondary contaminant, meaning that it is regulated primarily for taste and odor impacts. The California Department of Public Health in 2005 granted a five-year waiver to the water system that allows the County to continue to deliver contaminated water. This waiver was based on the County's allegation to the community that treating the problem would triple water rates.

At the time that the waiver was granted, capital funding (in the form of Community Development Block Grants) was available to cover the cost of constructing a new treatment system. A study conducted at the time found that the ongoing costs of operating and maintaining the new system would be comparable to the cost of not building the project. That study assumed that the County would take steps to reduce manganese contamination by regularly flushing the system's pipes, a standard practice. It is not clear that the County is performing the recommended flushing.

Next Steps: The waiver for this community expires in September. It is likely that the County will seek to continue to provide substandard water to this community.