

WATER DEMOCRACY IN CALIFORNIA

COMMUNITY RIGHTS NOT CORPORATE CONTROL

COMMUNITIES FIGHT FOR SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Access to clean, safe, and affordable water is a fundamental human right essential to our health, the environment and the economy. California is the sixth largest economy in the world, but millions of Californians lack safe drinking water. Thousands more live in the path of polluted floodwaters, fish in polluted waterways, or swim at sewage-contaminated beaches. Most are people of color and low-income people and their stories are told on pages 2-3.

This chronic lack of safe drinking water is just part of the total environmental discrimination that occurs when government or corporate policies deny equitable access to the ecological, social, economic or political resources necessary for the health and prosperity of these communities, that are daily exposed to contaminated water and a polluted environment that seriously harm personal, family and community health.

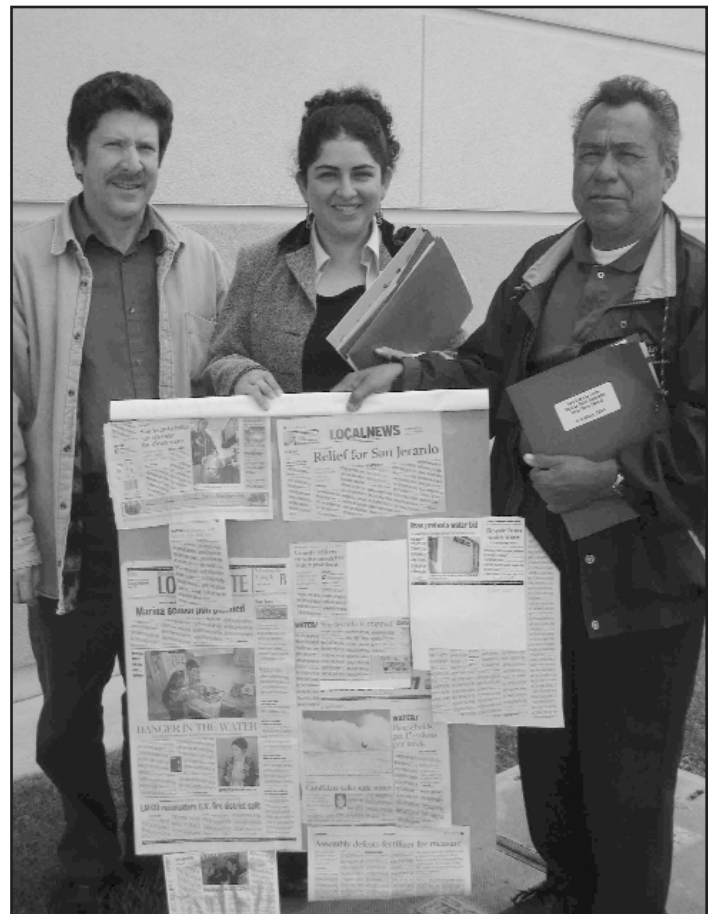
Wells in the Central Valley, about 75% in Tulare County, are polluted from decades of unregulated agricultural run-off, discharge from large dairy operations, food processing plants, and individual and community sewer systems. Nitrate and other contaminate levels regularly exceed legal limits and public health standards. Central and Salinas Valley communities suffer financially from government neglect. They pay for contaminated tap water they can't use, and have to buy bottled water that might be 10% or more of household income.

The state's water justice problems do not stem from too little water, but rather from too little equity. For example, water in Tooleville, a poor Central Valley farm-worker community, is unsafe, but nearby wealthy Exeter has safe drinking water.

Equity also means participation in decision-making that is often denied to these communities. The Public Utilities District refused to conduct meetings or provide materials in Spanish until residents of Cutler-Orosi and other Tulare County towns forced the District Board to provide translation.

Typically, the demands of hard work, family needs, and transportation costs keep most people from Public Utilities Commission hearings in distant San Francisco on rate increases they can not afford.

The state's discriminatory and exclusionary practices and water policy are implemented by a complicated, fragmented system of water regulation and control. A confusing maze of water districts, mysterious agencies, and powerful secretive corporations manage water through "old boy" networks that prevent community members from having a voice in the decisions that affect them. Regulatory agencies fail in their responsibility to ensure safe, affordable water and to protect the democratic right and ability of low-income communities and communities of color to participate in the decision-making process. When community needs go unmet, the quality of life is diminished. Water justice requires a participatory system of water governance and new, community-based forms of management and regulation. ■



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