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## DANGER IN THE WATER

### San Jerardo residents contend with contaminated wells

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In the living room of his four-bedroom house, Refugio Lopez talks about the life he's been able to provide for his family while living at the San Jerardo Cooperative south of Salinas.

The 56-year-old driver and his wife reared their six children in the somewhat idyllic San Jerardo area -- 33 acres of farmworker cooperative surrounded by lettuce and strawberry fields. Thanks to the strict demands on residents, his children toed the line and stayed out of trouble. And thanks to the cooperative's affordability, he was able to give them all education beyond high school. Four of the children graduated from California State University at Fresno.

But a longtime problem at the camp continues to plague the residents: contaminated groundwater.

With high levels of nitrates, the tap water for the 64 families of San Jerardo has not been potable for almost five years. While Alco Water Service brings each family three 5-gallon bottles weekly to use for cooking and drinking, residents say it's not enough for some families.

And they suspect the contaminated water could be causing some health problems.

"Many of the residents complain of having skin rashes," said Lopez's 37-year-old daughter, Sonia. "I lose fistfuls of hair after I take showers, my eyes become irritated. The water smells really bad."

The water problem dates to 1990, when Alco Water Service, the company in charge of the camp's water system since its founding in 1979, drilled a well to replace two contaminated ones.

According to court records, tests in September 2001 showed that the water in the third well had nitrates at 61 parts per million, exceeding the state standard of 45 ppm. In October 2001, the residents were told to begin using bottled water.

Excessive levels of nitrate, a chemical commonly found in fertilizers, can cause serious illness and sometimes death, especially among babies and the elderly. Long-term exposure to nitrates can cause diuresis -- excessive urine caused by contaminants in the kidneys -- and bleeding of the spleen.

Alco served the cooperative's approximately 250 resident-owners until earlier this year, when it was placed in receivership for its inability to meet federal water quality standards. Some of the Alco service areas -- particularly those in North County -- were picked up by the Pajaro-Sunny Mesa Community Services District. But the district was reluctant to take on the San Jerardo service area.

"When Alco was sued, no for-profit water company was willing to take it over," said Marc del Piero, an attorney representing Pajaro-Sunny Mesa. He said the system at San Jerardo is so contaminated that nobody was willing to invest any money to restore it. "We knew that without significant grant funds we could not raise money, and folks (in the labor camp) can't afford it."

Since Pajaro-Sunny Mesa recently agreed to take over the operations, it has secured two verbal commitments for up to \$1 million to improve the water system. Half is from the California Department of Health Services and half is from Community Development block grants.

"We're plugging along," Del Piero said. "If it were me, I'd be impatient as the devil too. This is an entirely unacceptable situation... but we're doing the best we can to try to help them. But in order to help them, there's a number of steps... we're going to have to go through."

Two of the biggest steps are getting a permit for Pajaro-Sunny Mesa to extend its boundaries, and finding a site to drill a new well outside San Jerardo boundaries.

The underground water is so contaminated it's unlikely that potable water can be found on the cooperative's acreage unless drilling can go at least 700 feet into the ground. But because San Jerardo is close to the mountains, drilling at 600 feet could unearth rock instead of water. The drilling would therefore have to be done closer to the valley floor to improve the chances of finding good water.

Monterey County Supervisor Butch Lindley is trying to persuade nearby property owners to allow a well to be drilled on their land -- so far, without success.

"Most of the surrounding landowners are not interested," Lindley said. "They're not inclined to have anyone, not just San Jerardo (drill on their land).... There are some property owners who are a little short of water and are concerned about the nitrates."

These days, water pumped from San Jerardo consistently contains nitrates at 80 ppm or 90 ppm, double the legal requirements, said the Monterey County Department of Environmental Health.

Another potentially harmful chemical has shown up in the water: 1,2,3-trichloropropane, in amounts more than 13 times higher than the "notification level" of 5 ppm.

Historically, 1,2,3-trichloropropane has been used as a paint and varnish remover, and a cleaning and degreasing agent. It's also been used as a fumigant. Exposure to the compound for short periods causes eye and throat irritation, and it's on the state's list of chemicals known to cause cancer. But the state has yet to establish safety standards, so companies are not required to clean it up when it is found in the water.

"It's one of the things that's really frustrating," said Amy Vanderwarker, an outreach associate for the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water in Oakland. "It's a perfect example of a chemical known to cause health problems but there's no agency to hold accountable for the contamination."

The Center for the Health Assessment of Mothers and Children of Salinas, which is investigating the environment and children's health in the Salinas Valley, is conducting a study of the effects of San Jerardo's water on its residents.

"We want to see what's the typical water use, how the water is used," said Jorge Hernández, project coordinator. "A lot of people are complaining of skin rashes, of hair falling out."

Nitrates by themselves may not be sufficient to affect the health of the residents. But the risk goes up when combined with other contaminants, such as the pesticides in the fields that surround San Jerardo.

"There's very little known about nitrates and pesticide runoff, and that's the scary part," Hernández said. "We eat these foods every day; it'd be wise to know the health effects."

Meanwhile, residents question why they must continue paying for water they can't use. Lopez and the other residents pay about \$50 a month for water.

"The meter doesn't work, the pumps don't work," said Horacio Amezcuita, resident manager of the cooperative. "But the bill arrives on time every month."

Amezcuita and Lopez, like most residents of San Jerardo, say they're beyond desperation about the situation.

"We feel impotence," said Lopez. "We would like to decontaminate the water, but we can't. And all the contamination in the water, whatever caused it, nobody takes responsibility for it."

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*Herald staff writer Joe Livernois contributed to this article.*