

California: It's time to fix this water issue

By **KRISTAL CABALLERO**

Paula, a mother of three, makes a regular stop on her way from work in Kern County to pick up cases of bottled water.

"I'm scared of the tap water at home," Paula says.

She has been purchasing alternative water for years, but not because she prefers to. The water coming from her tap is contaminated with arsenic, and unsafe to drink.

"Worrying about water making my children sick should be the last thing on my mind, but this is the reality I live in," says Paula.

Despite a rainy winter, a serious water crisis continues in California. Paula is nowhere near alone. Nearly one million Californians, including 1,200 Santa Cruz County citizens, are served by contaminated public water. According to the State Water Board, nitrate and arsenic are the two most common contaminants in California's water systems. While arsenic is a naturally occurring substance, nitrate contamination stems from agricultural activities such as fertilizer and manure runoff. For this reason, California's most abundant agricultural areas — the Central Coast, Central Valley, Sierra Foothills, and Central Coast — are also those most heavily burdened by water contamination.

Chronic exposure to arsenic and nitrate can have devastating health effects. Arsenic is carcinogenic — exposure to small amounts over time is associated with multiple forms of cancer. Arsenic toxicity can lead to developmental effects, cardiovascular disease, and other critical health conditions. Chronic nitrate exposure can be fatal for infants, especially if contaminated water is used to mix formula. Infants can develop "blue baby syndrome," where the blood's ability to carry oxygen throughout the body is inhibited. Nitrate exposure can also lead to respiratory diseases and decreased organ function. Approximately 200 community water systems, representing approximately 10 percent of California's groundwater area, were found to contain dangerous levels of nitrate in 2013 alone. Poverty exacerbates these health impacts. While rich in agriculture, Fresno and Tulare counties have the highest poverty rates in the state, with one in four residents living in poverty. With long-standing water contamination issues, some households in these communities devote up to 20 percent of their annual income to purchase safe water. Families in poverty must use limited resources to buy water, or risk contamination by drinking from the tap so they can afford other necessities like rent, food and medical care. This injustice risks public health and threatens economic stability.

deliver temporary assistance to households who must buy water in addition to food when local water is persistently unsafe to drink.

This short-term, emergency solution is needed as we work towards permanent fixes for California's broken water system. This proposed initiative, which would help approximately 40,000 residents over the next year, represents just .01 percent of the \$40 billion worth of water infrastructure advances needed over the next 20 years to bring clean drinking water to all Californians.

We cannot allow a Flint, Mich.-like crisis to continue here in California. State leaders must take swift action to protect health, build accountability, and invest in a more equitable future. Existing systems like CalFresh can provide critical assistance to those most in need. Safe water is essential for all aspects of human life. California is seen as a national leader in environmental health. Now it's time for California to take care of the basics, and invest in clean water for all.

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After spending four years working on hunger issues in Santa Cruz County, Kristal Caballero is now a Master's student in the School of Public Health at UC Berkeley. Caballero also advocates for equitable statewide anti-hunger policies as Policy Fellow with the California Food Policy Advocates. Follow her on Twitter @KCaballero_CA.