

To CNPA judges in consideration of the Public Service Journalism award,

[Hundreds of communities in the San Joaquin Valley have experienced years of contaminated drinking water](#), with only intermittent news coverage. This last year, Fresnoland -- a team of journalists at The Fresno Bee -- embarked on an ongoing reporting project to elevate the problem that disproportionately affects low-income, farmworker and Historic Black communities. We worked to hold regulators and officials accountable, and, most importantly, to write stories and produce multimedia that directly informs and benefits residents in impacted communities.

In the last eight months, we profiled community water system problems, investigated drinking water failures, held online events to answer residents' questions, raised funds to provide households with clean drinking water, advocated for increased agency transparency, researched historic decisions that contributed to the problems, critiqued the state's solution, and began to hold elected officials accountable to their campaign promises to bring broader solutions at the federal level.

[The reporting project began with Earlimart.](#)

The impacts of The Fresno Bee's reporting on the Earlimart Public Utility District's failure to deliver residents clean water has been measurable and encouraging. As a result of our stories, families are better equipped to protect their health, residents gained improved access to administrators at the utility company, and Earlimart's water crisis was discussed by policymakers at the highest level of government.

We listened to residents

Earlimart residents were aware their water was briefly shut off, but many did not know it was contaminated when it came back on. Through engaging the community via listening sessions, door-to-door interviews, and online surveys, we heard from nearly three dozen residents and learned that the problems with the water went beyond a brief shutoff. We met with school administrators, business owners, homeowners and renters to hear their experiences. After hearing from one community leader - Abigail Solis, she was invited and accepted joining the advisory board of our journalism team, Fresnoland.

We investigated their concerns and provided accessible information

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Su guía de agua en Earlimart

Con los recientes cortes de agua y el aviso de hervir agua en Earlimart, habido muchas preguntas sobre lo que está sucediendo con el sistema de agua.

P: ¿De dónde viene el agua de Earlimart?

R: El Distrito de Servicios Públicos de Earlimart brinda servicio de agua a más de 8,000 residentes y docenas de empresas en la ciudad de Earlimart. Toda el agua del grifo es agua subterránea. Proviene de acuíferos subterráneos profundos en la Subcuenca Tule, bombeados con pozos y entregada a los hogares a través de tuberías.

P: ¿Por qué hubo un aviso de hervir agua?

R: Los reguladores estatales dijeron que podría haber bacterias en el sistema de agua después de un corte de agua. Por eso emitieron el aviso de hervir agua del 28 de mayo a junio. El agua hervida mata bacterias y previene enfermedades estomacales e intestinales. El aviso de hervir fue cancelado después de que las pruebas mostraron que no había bacterias, según los reguladores estatales.


P: ¿Por qué perdí el servicio de agua a fines de mayo?

R: Un pozo de agua en Mary Ann Avenue se quebró y no bombeaba agua. Había gravilla en la bomba y cuando los trabajadores de mantenimiento miraron el pozo con una cámara descubrieron que la carcasa había fallado. El agua servió otra vez cuando el distrito giró de otro pozo.

Preguntas / comentarios?

Contacte a Fresnoland en fresnoland@fresnobee.com

 @fresnoland

 @thefresnoland

 @fresnoland

P: ¿Es seguro beber mi agua?

R: Parte del agua en Earlimart actualmente proviene de un pozo contaminado con riesgos conocidos para la salud después de una exposición a largo plazo. Está contaminado con un químico llamado 123-TCP de un pesticida viejo.

P: ¿Qué puedo hacer para mejorar mi agua?

R: Si tiene baja presión de agua o le preocupa la calidad del agua, tiene algunas opciones.

1

Reporte el problema

Llame al Distrito de Servicios Públicos de Earlimart al 661-849-2663, presente una queja a la oficina del Distrito de Tulare de la Junta de Control de Recursos Hídricos del estado al 559-447-3300.

Es posible que se le pregunten su nombre y dirección para que los reguladores puedan rastrear la causa del problema del agua. Puede dejar un mensaje anónimo. No tiene que dar su información personal. Idioma español disponible.

2

Asista una reunión pública

Las reuniones de la Junta de Directores del Distrito de Servicios Públicos de Earlimart son públicas. Tiene derecho a ir allí y comentar sobre el servicio de agua o hacer preguntas. Las reuniones generalmente se llevan a cabo a las 2 p.m. el tercer lunes de cada mes en la oficina de servicios públicos en 396 N Church Road Suite No. 6. Se debe publicar una agenda en la puerta del edificio de servicios públicos al menos 72 horas antes de la reunión.

3

Reducir la exposición

Puede reducir la exposición a contaminantes del agua bebiendo y cocinando con agua embotellada. Ciertos filtros que usan carbón activado, como un filtro Brita, pueden eliminar la contaminación TCP del agua del grifo si el filtro se cambia con más frecuencia de la recomendada.

We interviewed the system operators, regulators, and national experts in water contamination to answer residents' questions. In addition to investigating and reporting on the problem with an in-depth story, we went beyond traditional means of distribution, by packaging and delivering critical health information in various multi-media that would be accessible to the impacted community. That included [a user-friendly utility story written for the impacted community in both English and Spanish](#), as well as Instagram and Facebook infographics that explained the situation and were then shared in community-based online groups.



2 pm Monday, July 20
Earlimart Public Utility District
water system meeting

Board of Directors to discuss the status of well repairs in conference call meeting.

To participate
call: 669-900-9128
Meeting ID: 870 7178 2382
Password: 189243

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We knew residents would have questions, so we embedded a [Google Form to collect feedback, then responded to everyone who participated](#), and updated the utility story to answer frequently asked questions.

We improved access to decision makers, information

One of the greatest frustrations we heard from residents was lack of access to administrators of the utility. Public meetings of the utility district are currently only announced with an agenda taped to the door of the utility's office building. We produced social media posts that announced the utility's next public meeting and described how to participate. During the meeting, administrators failed to ask for public comment, until the reporter requested a time for public comment. At that point, residents were able to ask questions directly of the board of directors.

As a result of our reporting that residents were unaware of water contamination, the state Water Board worked with the utility district to improve public education with technical assistance.

We elevated the issue to decision makers


As a result of our questions to state officials and reporting, the plight of Earlimart residents was elevated to decision makers within the State Water Board. In addition, Kamala Harris - at that time a senator and presidential candidate - commented on the situation in Earlimart, which gave local residents hope that people in power were paying attention. Now that she is vice president, Harris has the ability to support federal infrastructure funding that could help address Earlimart's water crisis, as well as hundreds of other communities facing similar problems in the state of California. And, [we are holding her accountable to those comments](#).



Vice President Kamala Harris @VP
US government account

Utterly unacceptable that in 2020, we still can't guarantee clean water to communities across America. It's a fundamental human right.

We have the solutions to address this crisis. Congress just needs to act.



What happens when a California town's drinking water system fails? A...
This Central California town's recent struggle getting drinking water is typical of troubles around the state.
fresnobee.com

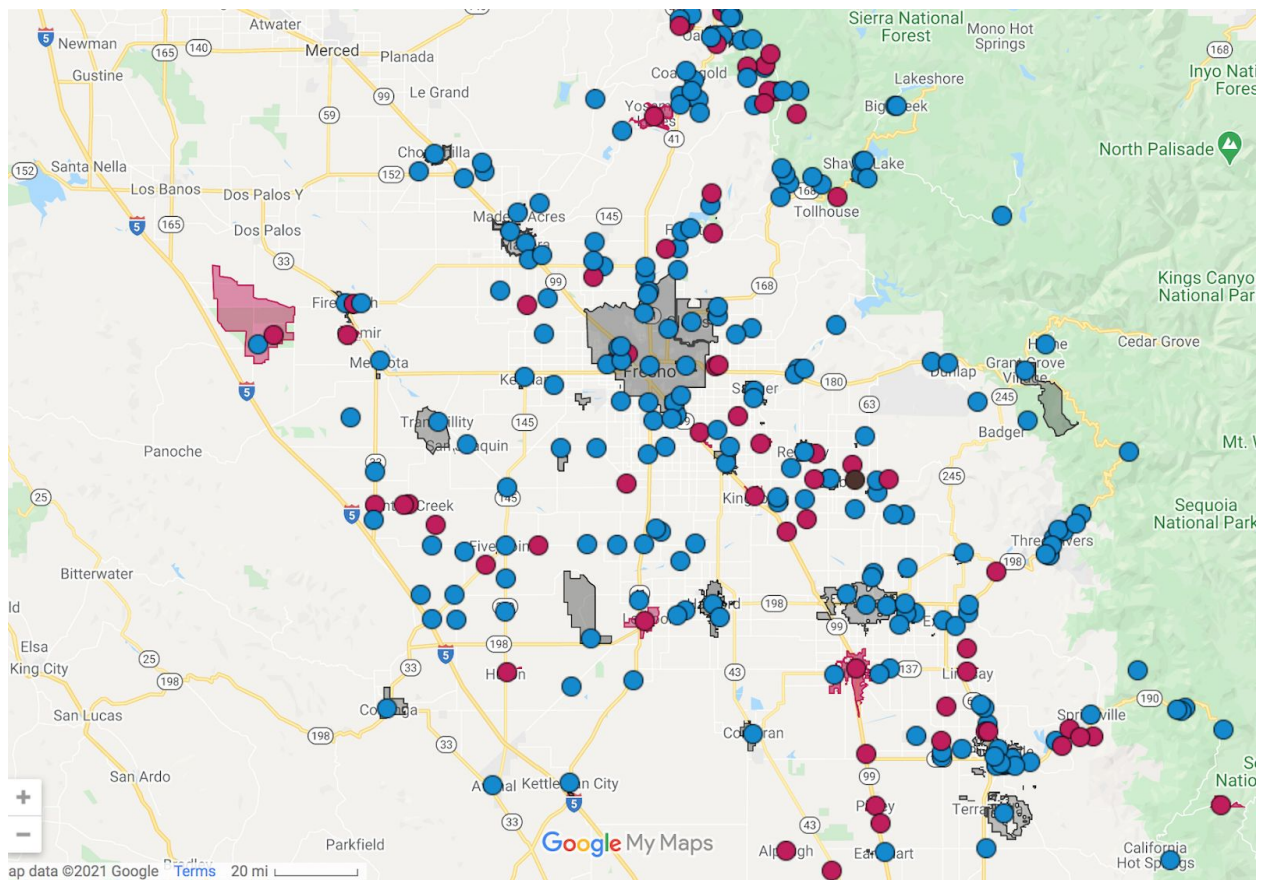
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We expanded coverage to other communities

As a result of our reporting in Earlimart, residents across the San Joaquin Valley reached out to us asking about the state of their drinking water. We took on the challenge of providing clear and easy-to-find information about whether community water systems' drinking water is contaminated and if so, how residents can stay protected from health risks.

We created [an interactive water quality map](#) that includes information on how to contact system administrators, as well as [a library of drinking water contaminants](#) that explains what filters work to address each chemical concern. The map has been used more than 48,800 times.



One of Gov. Gavin Newsom's first acts as governor was signing a law that created the SAFER program to provide long term solutions to water contamination issues. A year after he signed that law in the community of Tombstone, we asked residents if their water had improved and then we analyzed what the law had accomplished and [wrote about shortfalls of the state's solution](#).

The state only regulates community water systems, yet hundreds of thousands of local households rely on private wells for their drinking water, and many don't know their water is

likely contaminated. To address this problem, we asked people on domestic wells what their questions are, and then we partnered with community experts to answer those questions [both in a published story and an interactive Facebook Live.](#)

Finally, we partnered with Univision of Fresno to report on [communities with toxic drinking water, producing English and Spanish-language videos to explain the issue.](#) We investigated the history of policies that created the problem and have allowed them to continue.

During that reporting process we met a community leader in Tipton who had been fighting to bring her low-income neighbors free bottled water so they wouldn't have to drink high levels of nitrate. [We fundraised from our readers and partnered with the community leader,](#) Estella Bravo, to distribute cases of bottled water to more than one hundred households in Tipton.

With additional remaining funds, we are able to pay for bottled-water deliveries to five households with pregnant women or infants at home, both of which are at high risk of negative health effects from nitrate contamination.

Thank you for your consideration,
Joe Kieta
Editor, The Fresno Bee

