

Clean drinking water coming to Lower Valley residents near dairy cluster

Ross Courtney, Yakima Herald Republic, September 23, 2015

More Lower Valley residents living near dairies deemed an imminent threat to public health because of their manure management practices will finally have the opportunity for clean drinking water.

An environmental group that settled a federal pollution lawsuit with three Yakima Valley dairies has contracted with a Sunnyside nonprofit to distribute the water, either bottled or mechanically filtered in the home.

Nuestra Casa, an organization that provides educational and health services to immigrant women and leads community outreach efforts for cities and schools, announced Tuesday that it will coordinate the effort to give out bottled water and reverse-osmosis filtration systems as a result of the U.S. District Court settlement in May.

Nuestra Casa staff, led by Executive Director Esperanza Lemos, will begin sometime next week sending mailers and knocking on doors of residents within a 3-mile downhill radius of the three dairies, often called the “dairy cluster,” north of Granger and Sunnyside.

“Clean drinking water should be a basic right for everybody,” Lemos said in a phone interview Tuesday.

In 2013, the Granger-based environmental group Community Association for the Restoration of the Environment sued the three dairies — Cow Palace, Bosma-Liberty Dairy and George DeRuyter and Son Dairy — under federal solid waste laws for allegedly causing nitrate pollution in private Lower Valley wells by allowing cow manure to leach into the groundwater. A judge earlier this year concluded the dairies posed an “imminent” public health threat, prompting the dairies to settle in August.

Paying for a clean water distribution program to be managed by a third-party was one of the main elements of the settlement, also called a consent decree.

“Getting the people in this community clean water has been one of the main objectives of the lawsuit from the beginning,” said Charlie Tebbutt, the Eugene, Ore., attorney representing the environmental group, commonly called CARE.

Other stipulations include double-lining manure storage lagoons and building concrete aprons under water troughs.

The water program will cost the dairies up to \$3,000 per month for the first three months and \$2,000 for each month after that until the nitrate levels at test wells are lower than 10 parts per million for two years straight, or if they have shown consistent improvement. If that’s not

enough, additional funding will be required from the dairies, not to exceed \$25,000.

The 3-mile radius area has about 570 homes. Under the settlement, those within that area with a well tested in the past five years for nitrates over 10 ppm, the federal drinking water standard, are eligible for bottled water or a reverse-osmosis filter for their home. Residents in the same area with more than 60 ppm of nitrates in their wells will automatically receive bottled water.

CARE will pay Nuestra Casa an hourly rate plus mileage and expenses. Lemos and Tebbutt would not release the amount but Lemos said it was the same as the rate the nonprofit has charged cities and schools for outreach work in the past.

Previous efforts at distributing water in the Lower Valley have had mixed results.

In 2012, Yakima County installed 172 filters using funds from the Legislature, but ended up returning some of the money.

In 2013, a Spokane consulting firm hired by the dairies to distribute water within a 1-mile radius of the dairies installed 36 of the 63 filters they offered and failed to connect with about 19 residents even after repeated visits.

Lemos promises more follow up and believes Nuestra Casa already has established a relationship with residents who may not always trust authorities.

“We’re going to mention our reputation as being a trusted entity,” she said.