

Progress for Lake of the Woods

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Written by Self-Help Enterprise

Lake of the Woods (LOW) is no stranger to the 'water struggle'. This unincorporated Kern County community located in San Emigdio Mountains, has dealt with old leaking waterlines and a drought impacted water supply for several years, and more recently, drinking water contamination.

Residents here get their water from groundwater supplied by the Lake of the Woods Mutual Water Company (Mutual), a not-for-profit company that serves approximately 401 households and businesses in the area.

In 2013, in the beginning of the drought, the Mutual's main water well went completely dry. Mutual immediately enacted mandatory water restrictions and was forced to haul water during the summer to supplement the community's water needs. During this time, the Mutual's water supply drastically fell from 300 gallons per minute to 70 gallons per minute, losing over two thirds of the water supply within only a few months. In addition to the low groundwater supply, the water distribution system was losing almost 40% of its pumped water through leakages of old waterlines and unmetered house services in desperate need of replacing. They drilled four dry test wells in search of water. The well construction and water hauling used up the Mutual's reserve funds. Water rates were doubled to cover increasing costs. In September of 2014, the State issued a citation to Mutual requiring it restore the water supply and install meters on the 400 system services.

In 2014 and 2015, Mutual worked closely with engineer Dee Jaspar and Associates and Self-Help Enterprises to obtain \$750,000 from State Water Resources Control Board to develop a hydrology study, project engineering, drill a new well and help offset costs for water hauling. The newly drilled well produced a limited water supply, but to their dismay, it was high in nitrates. Nitrate is a common groundwater contaminant in rural areas and is most dangerous to pregnant women and newborns. A

\$500,000 USDA/Rural Development emergency grant was obtained to rehab and connect a private well with clean water to the system. Both funds were used to construct a blending station to mix water from the high Nitrate well with low nitrate waters from the Mutual's other wells. Together this drought project added two wells to the system and provided some additional, much needed, but limited, water supply. Later, one of the other wells supplying the blending station was found to have high fluorides; but it was being addressed and improved via the same blending station.

In 2016, in cooperation with the County of Kern, Buena Vista Water Storage District, Kern County Integrated Regional Water Plan, Provost and Pritchard Engineering and SHE, Mutual received \$1.4 million in IRWM funds from the State Department of Water Resources to install meters and replace leaking water lines. SHE helped Mutual to apply for and receive a matching grant of \$1 million from the USDA/Rural Development program in 2016 to replace more old, leaking, small water lines. In 2019, a second USDA/Rural Development grant of \$201,858 was approved for additional project work. Mutual and it's members also contributed over \$100,000 toward the meter and waterline replacement project, including construction financing costs. This month, Mutual completed the waterline replacement and meter project with the installation of 1,700 feet of new water lines and the installation of 401 meters.

"This was a challenging project in that the system was very old and there was limited information on the location of the existing water and service lines. Service lines that were originally fed to the back of houses had to be reconfigured to comply with building code requirements. Many hours were spent locating the existing service lines and coordinating with residents and water company staff to place the new meters in the best location for all involved. Lyles Utility Construction should be commended for their efforts to provide the most benefit to the community by working closely with the water company, engineer, and funding agencies to develop and construct a project that was within budget while still accomplishing the goals of the project to the greatest extent possible. This project has been a long time coming and we are very thankful that we have been allowed to be a part of the team working to help restore a safe and

reliable water supply to the Lake of the Woods community,” said Jeane Hill, Project Engineer at Provost & Pritchard Consulting Group.

Despite the progress, the Mutual’s Office Manager, Pam Jarecki, says she’s excited for the progress but there is much work to be done. “We are working to secure the funding needed to purchase the software to read the meters, get a full-time operator for blending station, and replace the rest of the old waterlines.”

To accommodate these changes, Mutual is raising their water rates in January to about \$73 per month, up 6 percent from this year. “The community is frustrated,” Pam says. “They feel they are not able to cook with or drink the water, because it affects pregnant women and infants under 6 months, wash their car or water their plants, is upsetting. The idea of being homeowners and not being able to do what they want on their property is frustrating, and we are frustrated too, we see the process and it can be daunting, but these projects take time. Nevertheless, we are making progress!”

The goal and community vision for Lake of the Woods Mutual Water Company is an adequate supply of clean water, water for fire protection, replacement of old, failing pipelines and regional consolidation with the Frazier Park Public Utility District and other water systems.

The Mutual has recently obtained State Department of Water Resources/Integrated Regional Water Management funding approval for the meter software and recording devices and water rate study. This equipment will save meter reading and tabulation costs, allow identification of lost water on the customer side, measurement of water use to set accurate metered water rates and document water loss in the remaining old water mains. With this information, Mutual can apply for additional funding to have the remaining old water lines replaced and set water meter rates that promote and reward conservation and allow residents to monitor and control their water use.

“This project is an example of the Mutual’s Board of Directors, dedicated staff and community bringing local, State and Federal agencies and much needed grant funding together to improve the local water system. Mutual managed to complete the project despite record rain and snow during the winter construction, a 5 week Federal government shut down and construction funding delays.” Said Dave Warner, Community Development Manager at Self Help Enterprises. “Additional Federal and State funds are needed by Lake of the Woods to finish replacing at least 5,000 more feet of old, leaking waterlines, and to fund the Frazier Park / Lake of the Woods Regional Water Supply Project. This long planned State funded Regional Water Supply project, currently in the planning phase, will provide an increased and secure regional water supply, fire protection and much needed water system improvements to over 3,500 people in the regional projects’ mountain communities.”

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