

# Community Water Center: *Protecting Groundwater from the Ground Up*

*An Environmental Justice Grant Success Story*

## Project Overview

Community Water Center, a San Joaquin Valley based environmental justice organization, works to ensure that all communities have access to safe, clean and affordable water primarily through community organizing, education and advocacy. This project raises the awareness of the issue through outreach and education.

## The Community

The communities of focus for the Protecting Groundwater from the Ground up, a project funded under a \$25,000 [Environmental Justice Small Grant from EPA](#), were rural, economically and socially disadvantaged, primarily Latino communities in the San Joaquin Valley that lack safe and affordable drinking water because of the region's extensive groundwater contamination problems.

California's San Joaquin Valley is one of the most agriculturally rich regions in the nation, contributing over half of the state's total value in agricultural production. It is also home to some of the nation's poorest communities. Among the poorest and most isolated of these communities are places outside city limits that lack the most basic features of a safe, healthy, sustainable neighborhood--including drinking water infrastructure.

As stated in the EPA Region 9 Strategic Plan

<http://www.epa.gov/region9/strategicplan/sanjoaquin.html>

noncompliance with federal and state drinking water requirements disproportionately affects disadvantaged communities and small systems in the San Joaquin Valley. Of the 2,354 community water systems in California that serve 3,300 or fewer persons, 568 are located in the San Joaquin Valley. Twenty-five percent of these violate one or more health-based drinking water standards, including arsenic and nitrate. These communities lack the economies of scale and resources needed to construct and operate expensive water treatment plants. They are also not able to participate in the decisions that affect their access to clean and affordable drinking water, as they face multiple participation barriers at both the local and regional level. These communities are disproportionately affected by the drinking water contamination problems in the San Joaquin Valley.



## **Project Description**

In 2011, with the support of the EJ small grant, the Community Water Center positively influenced disadvantaged communities in numerous ways. Over one hundred community residents were informed about the causes and effects of the drinking water contamination in their region. The residents were educated on strategies to prevent and reduce further pollution of their drinking water sources, and were empowered to advocate for such strategies at the local, regional and state levels. Impacted residents participated in greater numbers and with confidence in decision-making processes that affect their ability to access safe and affordable drinking water.



The Community Water Center conducts a community meeting in the unincorporated community of Monson.

## **The Results**

CWC assisted 25 communities and worked with 141 residents from Fresno, Hanford, Modesto, Visalia, Delano, Merced, Lodi and surrounding areas to raise awareness of causes and effects of the drinking water contamination in their communities. The residents were also educated on strategies to prevent and reduce further pollution of their drinking water sources, and were empowered to advocate for such strategies at the local, regional and state levels. Out of the trained residents, 28 community members participated in decision-making processes that affect their ability to access safe and affordable drinking water at the local, regional and state level.

## **Opening New Doors**

As the result CWC community education work, there is an increase in overall public awareness of the drinking water issues facing the San Joaquin Valley, both within the Valley itself – among residents, industry leaders, regulators and legislators – and throughout the state of California. There were concrete actions from regulatory agencies and decisions made toward more effective groundwater protection and water infrastructure improvements for rural Valley EJ communities disproportionately impacted. This includes funding and implementation of studies to assess the feasibility of various groundwater protection and clean-up plans; the incorporation of disadvantaged Valley community needs in regional water management plans; and the resulting funding, development and implementation of water infrastructure improvements. Specifically, these efforts include the Tulare Lake Basin Disadvantaged Communities Water Study, the Upper Kings Basin Disadvantaged Communities Pilot Study, and securing a \$4 million funding commitment from the State of California to support interim solutions in disadvantaged communities without safe drinking water. These efforts should result in cleaner water for all San Joaquin Valley residents and decreased long and short-term health risks to residents and their children.

## **What's Next for the Community Water Center**

The Community Water Center continues to make a significant difference at the community, local, regional, and state levels by advancing human rights to clean and safe water. Some of their strategies include educating and organizing environmental justice communities; providing support for systematic changes to address the root causes of unsafe drinking water in San Joaquin Valley; and serving as a resource and expert on community water challenges.

## KEY RESULTS

- Increased awareness of the causes and effects of contaminated drinking water in 25 communities
- Increased awareness of strategies to prevent and reduce further pollution of drinking water sources in 25 communities
- Empowered 141 community members to advocate for solutions at the local, regional and state levels
- Increased federal and state regulator and state legislature's awareness of this issue

To learn more about the Community Water Center, please visit <http://www.communitywatercenter.org/> or contact Susana DeAnda , Co-Executive Director, at (559) 733- 0219 or [susana.deanda@communitywatercenter.org](mailto:susana.deanda@communitywatercenter.org).