

Northern California Towns are Running Out of Water

Paskenta is facing its third year in a row of water shortage because a creek, which is its sole source of water, is dropping. The town is one of more than a dozen in northern California facing water shortages.

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The drought has dropped water levels in Thomes Creek, the sole source of water for Paskenta, Calif., which may soon have to truck in water for residents again. U.S. Forest Service

PASKENTA, POPULATION 112, is an out-of-the-way place where rustic ranches grace grass-covered hills rolling west toward Mendocino Pass. Since the lumber mill closed in 1992, the Tehama County community 130 miles (210km) north of Sacramento has been settling into bucolic tranquility.

A water crisis has triggered a rude awakening.

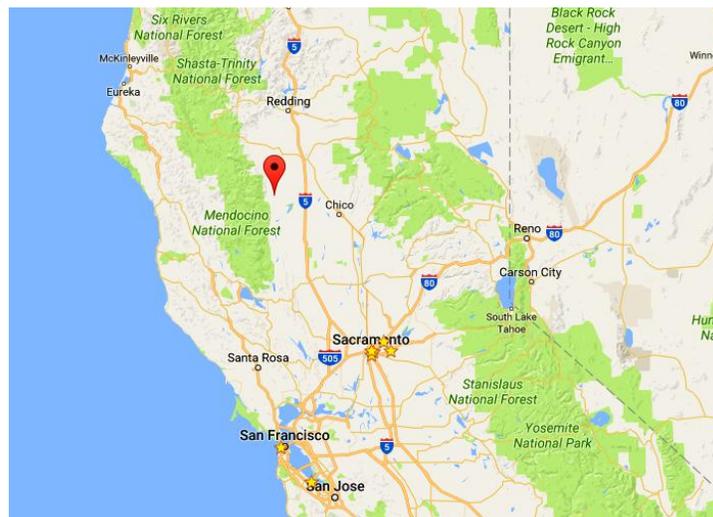
Thomes Creek, the sole source of water for the Paskenta Community Services District, is dropping. A pump that taps the underflow from a pool in the creek is a mere 6ft (1.8m) below the current water level, said Janet Zornig, the district’s manager.

“If it keeps up like this – and no rain in sight – we’ll have to haul in water,” she said.

While the crisis Paskenta is facing is the most critical, more than a dozen communities in northern California are grappling with diminishing water supplies. Most, like Paskenta, are located along the edges of the northern Sacramento Valley, where groundwater diminishes as the elevation rises. Most, like Paskenta, rely on streams that flow into the Sacramento River.

“All of the water systems located in that bathtub ring are struggling,” said Reese Crenshaw, a Redding-based district engineer with the state’s Division of Drinking Water, a part of the California Department of Public Health.

Four consecutive winters with little or no snowpack, followed by four dry summers, have upended water systems from Glenn and Colusa counties, on the west side of the Sacramento Valley, to Butte County on the eastern slope. The difficulties go beyond lower levels in the creeks and reservoirs they depend upon. Among them is a drought-caused requirement, issued by the state’s Division of Water Rights, that all systems on tributaries to the Sacramento River find alternative sources of water. These “drastic measures” are designed to protect fish and those who hold senior water rights, Crenshaw said.



Paskenta, Calif. is located 130 miles (210km) north of Sacramento. The town is one of about a dozen in northern California facing water shortages. (Google Maps)

Because it flows into the Sacramento River, Paskenta has been ordered to stop using Thomes Creek. It's a directive fraught with irony since the stream is already low enough to cause the current emergency.

Paskenta has been facing a water crisis for three consecutive years. In 2014, when Thomes Creek dropped to levels too low to pump, the community hauled water from Corning 20 miles (32km) to the east. The Corning City Council authorized 20,000 gallons (75,000 liters) of water per day for the Paskenta Community Services District. This approval was due to expire on June 30, 2015, but the council renewed it last year.

Last month Corning officials once again came to the rescue of their neighbors in Paskenta. Recognizing the dearth of water as a health and safety emergency, they reauthorized the Paskenta district to collect and transport up to 20,000 gallons of water daily at the rate of \$5 per 1,000 gallons.

The trucking hasn't started yet but it appears imminent. Last year, when hauled water was the only source after August 26, the 250 people on the community water system were restricted to 100 gallons per household per day, Zornig said.

This year? "I can't tell you. Right now we're not out of water," she said.

Meanwhile, state officials are planning to drill a test well east of Paskenta to develop a secondary source as an alternative to Thomes Creek. Groundwater in that area is always scarce, said Crenshaw. If they don't hit a sufficient supply they will install a storage system with a capacity of 3 million gallons. The current storage tank holds around 200,000 gallons, enough for between five and eight days, he said.

The toll that drought has taken on northern California water systems is not limited to communities along the edges of the Sacramento Valley.

In 2014, Willits, in coastal Mendocino County, was down to a 100-day supply in the reservoirs that are the water source for its 4,850 residents. Since then the city has drilled a well as an emergency backup supply, paying most of the \$1 million costs out of reserve funds, said Willits mayor Bruce Burton.

This year the reservoirs are at 80 percent capacity. Optimistic that "days of plenty" have returned, Burton dismissed any worries about diminishing water supplies caused by long-term climate changes.

"Talking about the weather is an ice-breaker for conversation. It's another way to say hello," he said.

Officials in nearby Brooktrails Township are not as sanguine. In 2014, when drought lowered the reservoirs that supply the community of 1,550, officials imposed mandatory rationing. The 110 gallons (415 liters) per day for a four-person household was barely over the state minimum of 27 gallons per day per person.

Today the Brooktrails reservoirs are full but the rationing continues, now raised to 250 gallons a day. And the community remains under a state-imposed moratorium on new connections until it provides an alternate drinking water source, said a spokesperson for general manager Denise Rose.

To ensure a stable supply of municipal water, the Division of Drinking Water required Brooktrails Township to request a tie-in to the city of Willits water supply. The community can't afford the backup system costs, estimated at \$1 million just for the installation.

"It really needs to rain," the Brooktrails spokesperson said.

Drought is creating a different set of problems for Del Oro Water Co. in Arbuckle, northwest of Sacramento. Overpumping caused the groundwater level to drop. The subsidence that followed was severe enough to damage the district's well, said Crenshaw. In Elk Creek near Willows, lowering groundwater allowed manganese to enter the community system. Residents there drank bottled water until treatment brought the manganese to within acceptable standards, he said.

Crenshaw predicted that more communities will experience water supply problems as the drought continues. "Each community has its own set of issues and solutions to deal with," he said. "We can't move the towns. They are there."

For Paskenta, a third year of living with the strict rationing imposed by trucked-in water may be approaching. Zornig, the water district secretary, credited residents with rising to the challenge the shortages have created. "They have learned to cope. I'm proud of them," she said.

Meanwhile, she is hoping for rain: "It's a gamble every year but it has rained in the summer before."

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