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Water project could again make faucet water drinkable near Fallon

BY BRIAN ROSENTHAL • BROSENTHAL@RGJ.COM • SEPTEMBER 18, 2009

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After living in South Maine Mobile Home Park for seven years, Dee Moore won't drink the water in her home.

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"It can kill you," the 70-year-old said matter-of-factly, sitting on the porch outside her home near Fallon on a record hot afternoon.

Moore said she knows firsthand the health concerns of the bacteria-laced water. Her daughter became infected with E. Coli from it last year.

After hearing years of promises to improve the water, Moore and her neighbors said they don't think it will ever happen. But if all goes according to plan, they all will be drinking out of their faucets by next spring.

The Nevada Division of Environmental Protection granted more than \$800,000 of stimulus money to upgrade the water for 100 homes in South Maine and two neighboring mobile home parks. Construction on the project, including digging a deep well and building an arsenic-treatment plant, will begin by February, officials said.

The project will support jobs for eight construction workers and multiple engineers for several months.

"I think it will be a good, very positive step for that whole community," NDEP spokeswoman Jill LuFrano said.

The 250 people who live in South Maine, Deluxe and Toalis Mobile Home Parks each deal with the water problem in different ways. Some buy expensive reverse-osmosis filters while others stock up on bottled water. A few even drink it straight from the faucet without a filter. But they all know the danger of doing that, residents said.

There are serious health concerns, said Rob Johnson, 52, a maintenance worker at Deluxe, who said he has seen the water reports himself.

The U.S. Environment Protection Agency's maximum level for arsenic in public drinking water is 10 parts per billion. At that level, drinking the water for many years could lead to an increased chance of cancer. The EPA recommends people avoid drinking water with 50 parts per billion of arsenic, and avoid physical contact with it if it gets a few times higher than that.

The water at the trailer parks outside of Fallon has an arsenic level of 200 to 300 parts per billion, Johnson said.

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DISPUTE ENDANGERS STIMULUS FUNDS FOR FALLON PROJECT

While plans move ahead to use about \$800,000 in stimulus money to dig a new well and build an arsenic treatment plant that will serve three mobile home parks in Churchill County, a dispute with the city of Fallon could endanger the funds.

Instead of creating its own mini-water system, owners of the mobile home parks would rather buy treated water wholesale from the city. State officials support that option, saying it better complies with established state water policy.

But Fallon Mayor Ken Tedford has refused requests to put the issue on a city council agenda, saying city ordinance allows it to only serve areas within city boundaries. He said urban developments outside of the city's boundaries are problematic and should be annexed before city water service can be provided.

If annexed, the parks, which serve low-income families and senior citizens, would have to spend about \$3 million on improvements to comply with city code.

State officials, who have urged Tedford to consider wholesaling the water to the mobile home parks, said they're willing to wait until the end of the month to see if a deal can be reached. If not, the stimulus money might be directed to another priority project. The owner of one of the mobile home parks, however, said they aren't willing to lose the stimulus money, even if the wholesaling option is cheaper. They plan to go forward with the well if an agreement can't be reached with the city.

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Deluxe manager Donna Waldo, 72, said that level is severely reduced through of a chlorinator in the well house that kills most bacteria. But she's said she's still concerned because the park has had problems in the past.

At South Maine, manager Pete Aja insisted that the water is safe to drink. "It meets all standards for drinking water," said Aja, sitting in the park office. "A lot don't drink it, but a lot do."

The 10-year manager acknowledged that he is among those who don't. He said he only drinks bottled water from town.

Resident Jeremy Constable said he also buys bottled water because the water that comes out of his faucet is "gross."

"It smells like rotten eggs," the 30-year-old said. "I shower with it, but then there's yellow grime on the tub."

The water at Toalis is better, but the water pressure is sometimes dismal, said 69-year-old Sevana Newman, a seven-year resident who has an osmosis filter.

"I've never heard anyone complain about the water. My only complaint is the water pressure," Newman said. "There's arsenic in the water, but there's arsenic throughout the state."

Still, Newman said she welcomed the water system project.

It will greatly improve life in the mobile home parks, said Brent Farr, president of Reno-based Farr West Engineering, which is doing the project along with nine other stimulus-related water projects in Nevada.

The project came from a grant the company wrote after studying the area for two years, Farr said. It will consolidate the three parks' water system into one, centered on a deep well, he said.

Engineers are planning to drill the central well about 600 feet deep, Farr said. The new well will include an adequate surface seal to keep bacteria out and will be connected to a 140 gallon per minute arsenic treatment facility to remove the arsenic, Farr said.

Moore said she still doesn't believe the project will happen, but if it does, it will greatly improve her life.

"If there's any way we can be helped, that would be great," she said. "That would be wonderful."

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