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Drought Disrupts Everyday Tasks In Rural Midwest

By **JOHN ELIGON**

WILDWOOD, Mo. — The wells supplying people’s homes are running dry here at the heart of the nation’s drought, which the government announced on Thursday has spread to 63.2 percent of the country, centered in the parched earth of the southern Midwest.

For some residents outside municipal water districts, it has become a struggle to wash dishes, or fill a coffee urn, even to flush the toilet. Mike Kraus, a cattle farmer in Garden City, Kan., twisted the tap on the shower the other day after work and heard nothing but hissing.

“And that was it,” he said.

While there are no national statistics on the rate at which residential wells are drying, drilling companies and officials in states across the Midwest have said that hundreds of people who rely on wells have complained of their pipes emitting water that goes from milky to spotty to nothing. An estimated 13.2 million households nationwide use private wells.

From the middle of June through the end of July, 100 to 150 people have contacted Indiana state officials complaining that their wells had either failed or were running dangerously low, said Mark Basch, head of water rights and use section of the state’s Department of Natural Resources.

Danny Flynn, the owner of the Flynn Drilling Company in Troy, Mo., said he had received hundreds of calls from people with well problems. Bruce Moss, a co-owner of Moss Well Drilling in central Indiana, said business has spiked 25 percent this summer. In the past two weeks, CLT Well Service in southwest Kansas has gotten four calls for residential wells that had gone completely dry, said Clint Tyler, the owner. Usually, they get about one such call a year, he said.

“It’s just crazy right now,” Mr. Tyler said. “We’ve never been this far behind.”

Gov. Jay Nixon of Missouri has moved aggressively to provide relief to farmers whose wells have run dry, allocating more than \$25 million in state aid to either improve the wells or help farmers get water by other means. Mr. Nixon said the state was considering ways it could help homeowners who have lost water, too.

“We are aware of that challenge,” he said in an interview. “It’s part of the portfolio of issues.”

Until then, homeowners are faced with an unhappy choice: spend thousands of dollars to either dig a new well or make the existing one deeper — or wait it out till the rains return.

Charles Bishop of High Hill, Mo., tried to muddle through. He and his wife drove five miles into town multiple times a day for about four days to fill a water tank on the back of their pickup truck after their well ran dry. They bathed out of sinks and used buckets to flush their toilets.

Eventually, they got their well drilled 100 feet deeper, Mr. Bishop said, a project that cost about \$10,000.

In the week or so that Mr. Kraus, his wife and two children went without running water, they bathed, drank and brushed their teeth with water from one- and two-gallon glass jars that they filled up at neighbors’ homes. Mr. Kraus, 35, said he also sometimes filled up a tank on his truck at an irrigation well at a farm about 24 miles from his home, where he raises cattle and grows some crops. He seemed able to turn the hardship into a lesson.

“It’s amazing how far you can stretch a gallon of water,” he said, noting that he could shower, brush his teeth and still have some left over.

The plunge in the water supply is mostly the result of a simple geological process. Without rain, aquifers deep beneath the ground have not been getting the water that seeps into the earth to replenish their supplies. In one part of northwest Indiana, Mr. Basch said, the groundwater level had dropped as much as 40 feet since late spring, or about eight times more than it normally does.

Compounding the problem for homeowners relying on diminished aquifers is the fact that municipalities and farmers who consume water on a much larger scale have been draining the groundwater supply at a faster rate this summer because of the drought.

There has been “a drop in the water table all over the state of Missouri, not just in one

specific area,” Mr. Flynn said. “I’ve never seen anything like this in the almost 30 years I’ve been running the company.”

Here in Wildwood, where a large area of houses in the town’s rural portions rely on well water because they are too far from the municipal supply, groundwater levels dropped more than 50 feet from late April through early August and now are around 20 feet lower than normal.

The first signs of trouble at Tom Kelpé’s spacious brick home here came without warning, while his wife was watering the flowers several weeks ago and cloudy water came out. As they ran the water more, it became muddy and swooshes of air were coming out, Mr. Kelpé said.

After consulting with a well driller, Mr. Kelpé, who owns a utilities contracting company, said he lowered his pump 20 feet. But that only caused a gugging sound.

So after several weeks, he lowered the pipe another 20 feet and that solved the problem. But in the interim, when the well was broken, Mr. Kelpé, 58, said he ran a hose to the house next door, which he owns and rents out. That gave them the water they needed, but with some slight inconveniences.

“You could smell the rubber hose when you took a shower,” he said.

Sandy Stringer, who also lives in Wildwood, said that resin pellets started coming out of the hose when she was watering one day and that the water turned brown. It eventually stopped flowing.

Her well was running out of water, Mr. Flynn’s company told her, though the water was still flowing smoothly inside of her house.

For now, Ms. Stringer, 58, and her family have decided to forgo spending the \$8,000 it would cost to drill their 440-foot well deeper; they just hope that they have enough water to last through the drought.

To conserve, the family waits longer between runs of its dishwasher and washing machine. They do not water the yard anymore.

When Ms. Stringer shaves her legs in the shower, she said, she wets her leg and then turns off the water.

“You take it all for granted,” Ms. Stringer said. “You don’t think of running out of water.”