

# Americans told to wash their hands to fight pandemic, but some don't trust the tap

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Image 1. Farmworkers harvest kale near Salinas, California, on May 1, 2020. Photo: Melina Mara/Washington Post

The Chavez family lives in California's fertile San Joaquin Valley where much of the United States' food is grown. For them, bottled water has become an everyday necessity. The only problem is that it has vanished from supermarket shelves.

This issue is not unique to the San Joaquin Valley. Access to clean water is a problem nationwide. It is being exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. A pandemic is an outbreak of disease that affects a large population of people across a wide geographic area. This virus has spread around the world.

For example, in the Navajo Nation, which includes parts of Arizona, New Mexico, and Utah, about one-third of the population lacks indoor plumbing. There, volunteers are creating public hand-washing stations. Residents in Eastern Kentucky distrust their local water. One woman said the water leaves her skin red and itchy every time she bathes.

Having spread across several major cities, the COVID-19 virus is also taking root in some rural communities. These communities have fewer resources than urban and suburban areas. Many of them lack clean water. This makes it impossible for residents to follow public health guidance like staying at home or washing hands frequently.

## Dangers Of Being Without Safe Water

The pandemic is also highlighting the huge racial and socioeconomic differences in access to clean water. It is intensifying calls for federal investment in the nation's troubled water system.

Some argue that the entire population is endangered when communities are left without safe water, one of the world's most basic resources.

"If we do not extend services to people who do not have them, we cannot control the virus," said Gail Brion, a professor of civil engineering at the University of Kentucky.



Infection and death rates due to COVID-19 have ramped up in rural areas, particularly in the Deep South and other regions plagued by poverty. The Navajo Nation, for example, ranks close behind hot spots in the Northeastern United States for infection rates.

Nobody is thinking about these areas where people are vulnerable, said George McGraw, the founder and chief executive of DigDeep, a nonprofit group that brings water to underserved areas. He says that there is a connection between the spread of the virus and communities that lack water.

### **Water Conditions In The 21st Century**

DigDeep released a report in late 2019 with the U.S. Water Alliance, a nonprofit that advocates for policies and programs to manage water resources. They found that more than 2 million Americans do not have indoor plumbing. Far greater numbers do not believe that their water supplies are safe or cannot afford to pay for them.

The report also found that black and Latino households are twice as likely as white households to lack a tap and a flushable toilet. Among Indigenous Americans, the chance of having to rely on an outhouse and a communal drinking-water source is 19 times higher.

Those groups are also more likely to suffer from diabetes, high blood pressure and obesity. These conditions put people at a higher risk of developing severe complications from COVID-19.

Some experts hope the pandemic could ultimately encourage investment in the country's water system. It is long overdue.

"Access to sanitation and hygiene is critical to public health," said Kristina Surfus. She is the managing director of government affairs at the National Association of Clean Water Agencies. The association has been calling on the federal government to spend money on water projects in its next bill to address the impacts of the coronavirus.

### **Some People Do Not Trust Their Water**

Currently, states and water utilities are losing resources from the economic impacts of the coronavirus. With less money coming in, they will have less money to maintain or update critical water infrastructure.

The challenge of improving and expanding America's network of more than 1 million miles of pipes is enormous. Many of those pipes are more than 100 years old, and most pipes are only expected to last 75 years. In a recent report card, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave America's drinking-water system a D grade.

The virus has also placed additional strain on people who do not trust their water. In California, Cristobal Chavez has long worried about polluted well water at his small family ranch. Now that the coronavirus has created shortages of bottled water, his family has little choice but to drink from their well.

Lucy Hernandez lives in nearby Visalia, California. She is a clean-water advocate. She said panic buying quickly emptied the shelves at stores including Walmart and Costco. Hernandez, who uses bottled water for drinking and cooking, said supplies are now rationed, prompting more frequent trips to the store.

"We are only allowed to buy two gallons of water per customer," said Hernandez, who has a household of five. "That only lasts one day in my house."

### **The Long Drive For Clean Water**

Advocates hope that swift action is taken to help the infrastructure and affordability problems related to water. This could help people like Legena Wagner. She lives on a small family compound without indoor plumbing in sparsely populated Apache County, Arizona. Her father now leaves home before

dawn to fill the family's water containers, driving about 45 minutes along red-clay roads to the windmill pump before others crowd around waiting for their turn.

McGraw, of DigDeep, said the nonprofit is working to install and refill tanks of water called cisterns. This could help isolated families like Wagner's.

"These places are at greatest risk. If we let them stay that way, we are all at risk," he said.

## Quiz

- 1 How did water rationing affect Lucy Hernandez?
- (A) Her family needed to make extra trips to purchase clean water.
  - (B) She decided to have a water tank installed on her property.
  - (C) Her family began to distrust their local water supply.
  - (D) She panicked and bought large quantities of bottled water.
- 2 Which of the following MOST influenced Kristina Surfus?
- (A) the concern that she does not have access to sanitary water
  - (B) the dangers of the aging water infrastructure in the United States
  - (C) the connection between clean water and public health issues
  - (D) the economic strain the coronavirus pandemic has put on local utilities
- 3 Based on the article, what is the MOST likely reason the author includes the perspective of Legena Wagner?
- (A) to help readers understand ways they can access sanitary water in a crisis
  - (B) to provide an example of the difficulty rural residents have in accessing water
  - (C) to explain why rural residents have an increased risk of contracting the coronavirus
  - (D) to emphasize the ways DigDeep has provided assistance to her family
- 4 What is the author's purpose for writing this article?
- (A) to explain how nonprofit groups are working to help rural communities build wells that provide clean water
  - (B) to emphasize bottled water has become scarce throughout the country because of the coronavirus
  - (C) to describe the relationship between lack of clean water and diabetes and high blood pressure
  - (D) to show how the coronavirus has highlighted problems that arise from the lack of access to clean water