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Frustrations mount over drinking water reliability in Boulder Creek: ‘We are at the breaking point’

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11-14 minutes

BOULDER CREEK — Take a left turn from downtown Boulder Creek onto Highway 236, and picturesque sky opens up, redwood canopies filling in the horizon like a landscape painting. But look a little closer and the remnants of the CZU Lightning Complex fire are still plenty.

Handmade signs along the throughway read “CZU FIRE SURVIVORS WE MISS YOU” and “THANK YOU FIREFIGHTERS.” Properties that once held homes, families and memories have been leveled to dirt lots and for sale signs.

More than a year after the historic fire was put out — and some residents were able to return home — much of the Boulder Creek region is still without reliable drinking water. The CZU Complex [destroyed most of the Big Basin Water Company’s pipelines and](#) tanks, along with its only surface water treatment plant.

The fire also burned down the water purveyor’s office, and with it all of its records. It meant residents had to boil water months after the blaze. And more recently [that’s become routine once again](#).

“We are totally dependent on water for our daily lives and Big Basin is failing us,” said customer Daniela Apostol.

Three water outages took place in October and customers faced multiple boil water orders — [one of which spanned up two weeks](#).

“You need a bottle of water to brush your teeth, to cook, to wash your hands,” Apostol said. “We’re at the breaking point. This cannot go on.”

The company, run by owner Jim Moore, his wife and son, faces millions of dollars in repair costs and state water board fines. As a result of the fire, it serves around 480 Boulder Creek customers from a single well.



Tap water runs at Big Basin Water customer Daniela Apostol’s home during a Boil Water notice. Apostol said she uses bottle water to drink, cook and brush her teeth with when the notice is in place. (Hannah Hagemann / Santa Cruz Sentinel)

Big Basin ratepayers say they are growing increasingly frustrated with erratic water service and slow-moving regulatory action. The company, customers report, is slow to communicate on crucial issues, and posted updates are confusing. The Sentinel found the company has also habitually missed deadlines set by the state to rebuild its infrastructure and improve water quality in the wake of the fire.

History of issues

In April, the State Water Resources Control Board Division of Drinking Water issued a lengthy compliance order to Big Basin Water.

According to regulators, Big Basin's problems [didn't begin with the fire](#). Issues with the company's aging infrastructure and concerns about water quality began surfacing in 2016. In 2018, the water board requested that the company make nearly \$3 million in upgrades to its system, which were not completed, documents show.

In that Sanitary Survey, regulators reported that Big Basin Water didn't have sufficient water sources to supply its customer base. Concerns were levied about wooden infrastructure as well as rodent feces being a risk to water quality.

Those issues were only exacerbated by the fire, said San Lorenzo Valley Water District Manager Rick Rogers. The district has worked to assist Big Basin since the CZU Complex fire, and recently provided maintenance crews to the company when a pipe burst, as well as access to a water fill up station to those without drinking water.

"It was struggling before the fire," Rogers said. "I think the fire pushed it to the point of no return."

Residents have reported their taps running brown after water outages. Some customers say they have lost confidence in the water quality with increasing outages and boil water orders.

"We need accountability and transparency," said customer Jen Parks. "If there are sanitation issues involved, it's a health and life hazard."

When a water system loses pressure Jennifer Clary, California director of Clean Water Action, explained, bacteria such as E.coli can leech into the water supply.

"Because E.coli is a bacteria, a single use can create illness, particularly in vulnerable populations," Clary said. "That's why you

issue a boil water order. It's extremely serious."

More than the short-term impacts though, Clary said the issue is a warning sign of deeper troubles with the water system.

Missed deadlines

Big Basin Water has missed major timepoints in rebuilding its water infrastructure, mandated by the State Water Board, and hasn't made significant progress on bolstering supplies, according to the agency.

The company didn't meet at least four of eight regulatory deadlines set forth in the compliance order, according to State Water Board – Division of Drinking Water Monterey District Engineer Jonathan Weininger.

Monthly progress reports have not been sent by the company, according to Weininger. A plan for a temporary surface water treatment plant, that would take pressure off the sole well serving the community, was accepted, but an installation date was not provided. A June deadline, which would have required the company to identify other ways in which water supply could be amped up, was also missed.

A mandate requiring the company to address the historic sanitary and supply issues identified in 2018 was also missed, according to Weininger. A July deadline which would have forced Big Basin to investigate how it could respond to water supply emergencies, such as a power outage or wildfire, was not met.

On Oct. 28, the Water Board issued a second citation to the company for failing to comply with deadlines, to the tune of \$21,000.

Big Basin is looking for funding to make upgrades and comply with the state, according to Jim Moore.

"My wife and I stopped taking any money at all, I just pay my son, because we don't have any money coming in," Moore said. "We're

losing money every month."



Apostol stands next to her water filtration system she installed in her Boulder Creek home. Apostol estimates she's spent around \$5,000 dealing with a year of boil water orders and tap shutoffs. In the wake of the fire, she chose to rent an apartment for a month when Big Basin was still testing water for fire-linked contaminants like benzene and taps were not running. Then, after she moved back in, she bought a UV water filtration system for her house so she could feel okay cooking and brushing her teeth. "I have no confidence in the water quality," Apostol said. (Hannah Hagemann / Santa Cruz Sentinel)

As a result of the fire, the company's customer base shrunk. According to Moore, 200 homes in the water purveyor's jurisdiction burned.

That combined with rates that haven't been upgraded since 2014, Moore said, means the company can't afford to make required upgrades. So far he said they have sourced \$200,000 attempting to abide by the enforcement order.

Miscommunications

Communication from the company has been a serious issue, according to residents and the State Water Board. Both in June and October, the water company did not notify the board of water shutoffs and implemented a boil water notice without regulatory approval, Weininger told the Sentinel.

During the system's most recent boil water order the company posted to its website that if the tap was running, water was safe to drink again. According to Weininger, that was inaccurate, and water still needed to be boiled.

An Oct. 1 boil water order that preceded a main pipeline break did not go into effect until about a day after the leak.

"What happened in between?," Apostol said. "We don't have any clear notification system. We have no idea what's going on."

Updates on crucial issues such as water shutoffs and boil water orders come through Nextdoor posts. A California based call center — Southwest Answering Service — has replaced the previous phone line, which was answered by company employees.

"All of the information that we get is just through word of mouth from our neighbor, or postings on Facebook, but a lot of people like myself don't have a Facebook account," said customer John Armstrong.

Armstrong said he's tried to connect with Big Basin owners but struggled to reach them.

"It's like prying open a safe with a crowbar, you just have to scratch away to try and get information," Armstrong said.

Residents have also voiced that the outages have taken a financial toll.

Big Basin customer Linda Moore and her husband were out of their home for nine months after the CZU Complex. Their house survived, but everything surrounding it burned including a shed, trailers and their yard. Their water infrastructure also burned. After moving through nine rentals, the couple came home to water

issues. Throughout the spring and summer, Moore said they've dealt with intermittent water outages, occurring only for their property.

"Because of our age, and the fact both of us have physical handicaps, it's difficult to lug the water back and forth. We can do 1 gallon, it's difficult to do the 5-gallon containers," Moore said.

Beyond that, the couple, say supplementing water has taken a financial toll.

"We're financially really stressed, the fire has driven us into a very difficult place," Moore said. "To continue to have to buy water, having the additional stress to deal with the outages, it's horrible."

Still Moore, who's of no relation to Big Basin owner Jim Moore, said she feels for the local family.

"It's a very difficult situation," she said. "I think everyone has empathy for Jim on the one hand and frustration on the other."

Consolidation possible

On Nov. 4, the San Lorenzo Valley Water District Board of Directors will vote on greenlighting the first step in exploring a consolidation with Big Basin Water Co. The district also suffered extensive damage in the fire, and has had to boost water rates in order to fund its own repairs.

District manager Rogers said the community and state must support the merging between Big Basin and the district for it to be successful.

"This is going to need to be a group effort from the elected officials, from the state, from all these people who put pressure on Big Basin Water to consolidate," Rogers said. "Now we need money."

Just to begin the investigation process of such a merger, Rogers estimated it would cost up to \$500,000, money he says, the district does not have.

“The SLV Water District cannot bear the cost. These costs have to borne by Big Basin Water Company,” Rogers said.

Still, Rogers said he’s confident funding for the consolidation and needed upgrades could be sourced through state and federal grants. He pointed to the billions Gov. Gavin Newsom allocated in the 2021 state budget for small water systems and those most impacted by drought.

The process would also have to go through The Local Agency Formation Commission, feasibility and engineering studies, as well as a public protest period.

The merger could be risky for the district. Compared to previous consolidation successes, such as in the Lompico area of Felton, Rogers said folding in Big Basin would be more challenging. But in the forefront of his mind are fire victims.

“These poor people that were burned out because of the CZU fire not only have a horrendous undertaking to rebuild their home, but also are dealing with the uncertainty of their water system...” Rogers said. “What are they going to do? Somebody has to step up.”

IF YOU GO

What: San Lorenzo Valley Water District Board of Directors meeting.

When: 6:30 p.m. Thursday.

Where: Through Zoom webinar at bit.ly/2ZSnNL8. For information on meeting agenda, visit bit.ly/3jXI3IE.