



Jim Ladrini, assistant field superintendent for the PID, with a melted water meter. Almost all of the district's meters melted during the Camp Fire, as they—and the boxes and lids that protect them—are made of plastic. They will be replaced with concrete ones.

they'll collect about 200 samples.

"Maybe we'll find that the benzene is just in the service lines and not in the main lines," Ladrini said. He admits he's an optimist, but says he's committed to conducting a thorough check. "I don't want to tell customers, 'I think we're OK.'"

A best-case scenario will reveal no contamination in either test area. Then they can start systematically narrowing the search. With the Skyway as the first priority, if tests come back clear, Ladrini says they'll likely need to hire an engineer to design a system that will prevent backfill—when a pressure change causes water to reverse course—so as to protect those clean pipes, which branch out to service properties off the main road.

The whole process, just for one area, could take anywhere from one month to several. The ultimate goal is to get services up and running cleanly for every standing structure in Paradise, even the lone house at the end of a burned-out neighborhood. After that's complete, they'll shift gears to the properties that are being rebuilt.

If no contamination is found in the PID's miles of pipes, it is likely confined to service lines—the capillaries, or the parts of pipe that stretch from the meter to the tap. Those sections of pipe are maintained by the customer, Phillips said, and testing there will be the customer's responsibility.

"I'm looking into private funding options to help folks pay for

that testing," Phillips said. For now, the PID is distributing free bottled water. The board of directors voted to forgo charging customers for service between Nov. 8 and Dec. 31. The first bills will go out in March and will be a flat fee, as meters will have to be replaced.

Some residents have purchased their own water tanks for cooking, drinking and showering. Others are content—for now—to shower elsewhere and use bottled water for other uses. Still others are waiting for all services to be up and running, or until the cleanup is complete.

"I had one customer give me a hug and say, 'I don't care if I can't drink it—all I need to do is flush the toilet,'" Ladrini said. "That function right there becomes one of the most important things in life—it's one of the simple things we take for granted."

But that luster could wear off before too long. Residents in Santa Rosa's Fountaingrove neighborhood balked at the city's estimated timeline of two years to repair its issue, with some refusing to return to their homes or begin rebuilding without potable water.

Chelsea Dwyer shares that stance. She and her husband, Addison, bought their first home in central Paradise in June. Tired of renting and unable to afford a place in Chico, she said, they looked to the Ridge. While repairs are being done to their property—looters had kicked in their front door and fire-

fighters had cut holes in the roof—they are back to renting in Chico.

"The advisory right now is they don't want us brushing our teeth, they say not to use hot water to shower, not to let our pets drink it, not to cook our food with it," she said. "We'd have to buy one of those portable storage tanks and pay a company for water. It just seems like a huge hassle."

While they wanted to move back in the beginning, the Dwyers are reconsidering. The lack of water is a factor in their decision.

"If water isn't available by the time the repairs are done and our insurance company says it's liveable, we're going to fight them; we're going to say, 'You have to pay for that portable system,'" she said.

Looking to the future, Phillips said

the Camp Fire has taught the PID some valuable lessons. For one, all of the plastic meters and the boxes that contain them—even those that survived—will be removed and replaced with concrete boxes with metal lids. New pipe likely will be steel or some other metal.

New construction, especially in such a mass quantity, will bring its own set of challenges, namely the fact that in 2011 the state passed a law requiring all newly built single-family homes be equipped with sprinklers. It also mandates a water pressure to each home that will require larger service lines be installed.

As far as the contamination and repair to fire-damaged infrastructure, Phillips said he's working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency and California Office of Emergency Services to ensure as much of the work is covered by grants and other funding as possible. The district's financial footing is wobbly at best, as 95 percent of its operating costs are born by ratepayers—and 90 percent of PID's ratepayers are gone. At least for now.

"We're trying really hard," Ladrini said of the PID's efforts to get everything up and running quickly and safely. "This is new territory." □

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