

"We can finally drink clean water"

EPA and nonprofit organizations join efforts to assist communities, whose aqueduct systems experienced damage after Hurricane Maria

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By Gerardo E. Alvarado León

San Lorenzo - A little more than three months after Hurricane Maria, the 37 families of the Quemado Arriba sector, in this municipality, can finally take safe water for their health, after their aqueduct system was equipped with solar panels and batteries of protection to guarantee its operation, regardless of whether or not they have electricity in their homes.

In Quemado Arriba, families are not supplied by the Aqueduct and Sewer Authority (AAA). They are what is known as a Non-PRASA community. On the island there are 237 community water supply systems, which supply 3% of the population or about 91,000 people, and all of them, to a greater or lesser degree, suffered damage with the cyclone.



WATCH: "We can finally drink clean water"

Aware of that - and of the health risks of drinking non-potable water - the Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) partnered with several nonprofit organizations to help repair communities of its aqueducts and provide sources of electricity to put them into service, whether with generators or renewable energy systems.

The EPA came to Quemado Arriba with the Water Mission organization, established in 1998, based in South Carolina, and leader of potable water projects in Latin America, Africa and Asia. The Federal Agency for Emergency Management (FEMA) also collaborated in the selection of the community.

"Sustainable project"

"After an evaluation, we determined that it was feasible to do a solar energy project here. The aqueduct was already established and we had the space, but the most important thing was the support of the community. The challenge here was to make a sustainable project in a short time (due to the hurricane's emergency)," Water Mission Disaster Response Coordinator Mark Baker told El Nuevo Día.

José A. Sánchez is the president of the Board of Directors of the Juan Flores Community Aqueduct and said that during the past weeks, as part of the Water Mission project, he and other Quemado Arriba residents have been trained in various aspects, such as of solar panels and batteries, water sampling and quality control, among others.

He specified that 48 solar panels were installed - on the roof of a house next to the water well - two inverters and two backup batteries from Tesla Energy.

"We can finally drink clean water in the community. For the first time in history, we have a reliable aqueduct system," said Sanchez, 56, who has lived in Quemado Arriba for two decades.

"More agile"

The director of the EPA in Puerto Rico and the Caribbean, Carmen Guerrero, explained that the union with nonprofit organizations served not only to assess the damage to community systems just after Maria's scourge, but also to speed up the response to the emergency.

"These entities have the ability to be more agile. They visited the 237 systems throughout the island and brought information to FEMA about the need for water service, but also about the state of the roads and health needs in the communities," he said.

Apart from Water Mission, the other non-profit organizations that are supporting communities in the repair of their aqueduct systems are Samaritan's Purse, Project HOPE and RCAP Solutions.



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Guerrero said that Water Mission has already installed five solar systems and plans to install another five, as part of its plan to expand operations on the island. The rest of the organizations, he added, have given support in assessments (damages assessments) and donations of water filters and purification systems, among other equipment.

"In the case of Water Mission, the team they are donating to solar systems comes from their own income. Right now, this has no cost to the communities," he said.

On this matter, Baker added that the only cost to the communities is long-term, since they must take care of the maintenance of the solar panels and batteries. They receive

training for this task.

"This project can last 20 years and the only cost for the communities will be to replace something that is damaged. We, as an organization, are going to make periodic visits to the communities that we are attending and we will communicate by telephone," he said.

Missing 31

On the other hand, Guerrero explained that, of the 237 community aqueduct systems, 31 still do not have electricity.

He said that FEMA delegated to the EPA to supply the service to these systems, and the agency evaluates equipping them with electric generators or solar panels and batteries.

"We want communities to communicate with us if they need it. The restoration of community water systems is a priority for us," he said, after offering the telephone number (787) 977-5865 for help.

Guerrero pointed out that, ultimately, what is being pursued is that the communities incorporate more resilient management models to their aqueduct systems, that is, that allow them to withstand future hurricane attacks or other phenomena.

The EPA continues to recommend that citizens take care with direct contact with bodies of water, including rivers, streams and beaches, given the possibility of health

discharges in some of them.

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, water contaminated with sanitary waste, livestock waste and chemical substances, among others, can cause diseases -gastrointestinal, in the eyes, on the skin, etc.- when used for drink, bathe and other hygiene activities.