

Water crisis nearly over

By KAREN CLARK
and STEVE PEREZ
Sentinel staff writers

Water Supply
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BEN LOMOND — More than 6,000 people still were without water late Tuesday afternoon in the hills around Boulder Creek, but officials expected that number to dwindle to about 600 by noon today.

Nine national guardsmen from Salinas arrived at the Ben Lomond Fire Department at 6:30 p.m. Monday, toting 1,500 gallons of drinking water from the Salinas Water District for people still suffering from four nights of pipe-bursting cold.

Although temperatures warmed considerably Christmas Day, another arctic air mass is due to hit this weekend, weather forecasters said.

"It could be worse," said National Guard Sgt. Mike Fessler about being

called to Ben Lomond to handle the water emergency during Christmas. "I could be in Saudi Arabia."

Fessler was called away from his job at a Monterey Safeway Monday afternoon to pick up the water and deliver it to San Lorenzo Valley. He said the guardsmen will stay until the emergency is over.

That could be soon, according to Fred Nitz, president of the San Lorenzo Valley Water District board of directors.

"We're down to perhaps 6,000 people still out of water," Nitz said at 4:30 p.m. Tuesday. "That's mainly in the area north of Boulder Creek and in the hills."

Among those who took advantage of the free water was Leonard Parisi, whose family of five lives behind the Boulder Creek Country Club.

"It's a real inconvenience," he said, as

his 10-year-old son Tony struggled to hoist a five-gallon bucket of water into the back of his pickup.

"But it could be worse. As long as we have power there's no problem entertaining ourselves and it helps make the time pass."

The water is being used to wash dishes and fill the toilet so it can be flushed, he said. Showers are being taken at a neighbor's house.

Parisi said a main line to the neighborhood was intact, but smaller lines leading to homes had apparently frozen. A healthy barbecue fire was stoked in an effort to get the lines flowing, but to no avail, he said.

"I hope it doesn't last for too much longer," he said. "It's kind of a hassle, but we're still thankful."

Please see WATER — A14

Water emergency

Continued from Page A1

Nitz said he expected all but 10 percent of those customers to have water by noon today.

"We're pumping water at 1,300 gallons a minute," said Nitz, who said the district was down to between 700 and 800 gallons a minute before a well that was broken before the big freeze was fixed on Monday.

The pump for the well had separated from the well casing and fell to the bottom, Nitz said. Workers were able to fish the pump out and reattach it to the casing Monday.

There are 15,000 customers in the San Lorenzo Water District, and Nitz said as many as one-third of them tried to keep their pipes from bursting in the cold Friday and Saturday nights by leaving water running.

"That first night, we saw so many hoses running full blast," said Nitz. "As much as 4 million gallons were lost, about a million of it from people leaving water running."

The rest was lost when pipes burst when water froze inside, said Nitz. The loss was as much as 1,500 gallons per minute from the two factors, and that ran the district dry.

"I've never seen such a severe loss of water," said Nitz.

The district was down to seven wells when the hard freeze hit, two were lost during the 1989 earthquake and the third — the district's biggest producer — was broken.

Normally, at this time of year the district uses surface water,

Nitz said. But because of the drought, wells provide approximately 80 percent of the district's water supply, he said.

Nitz, who, like the crew and office staff at the water district, has been running hard since Friday night, warned residents with restored water to boil it at first because of the possibility of backflow because the lines had lost pressure.

Testing of the water's cleanliness will begin today and could last into the weekend, he said.

Signs more often seen during the summer were up again in Ben Lomond and Boulder Creek telling residents they were in a Level 5 stage of drought — the most critical of all.

Nitz said it was an attempt to get those who had water to ration it because of all the water lost in the aftermath of the freeze.

"People seem to be doing well so far," said Nitz about the mood in the waterless mountain communities. "People up here help people."

Members of the Valley Churches United and the Valley Resource Center were taking drinking water to shut-ins and the elderly on Christmas to make sure everyone survived the emergency.

In addition to helping dispense the drinking water, the national guardsmen have a 3,000-gallon water tanker at the Ben Lomond station to help battle any fires.

Anyone who still needs drinking water this morning can get it from the guardsmen at either the Boulder Creek or Ben Lomond fire stations.