A $5.7 million settlement, and the money still unspent — Earlimart, Tulare County

Earlimart is a town of more than 8,000 people, roughly 40% below the poverty line, that won a real court victory over the chemical companies that poisoned its water — and three years after collecting a $5.7 million settlement, still hadn't spent it on a new well.

$5.7M

2019 settlement Earlimart won from Dow Chemical, Shell Oil, and Wilbur-Ellis over 1,2,3-TCP contamination, from a lawsuit filed in 2012.

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Days Earlimart was under a boil-water notice in 2020 after its roughly 50-year-old Mary Ann well failed outright.

What happened

Earlimart, in Tulare County, is more than 8,000 people, predominantly Latino, with roughly 40% of residents below the poverty line and about half foreign-born. The town's water carries 1,2,3-trichloropropane (TCP) — a now-banned, carcinogenic byproduct of soil fumigant pesticides manufactured and sold by Dow Chemical, Shell Oil, and Wilbur-Ellis, among others, decades before TCP contamination was understood or regulated. The state began regulating TCP in 2018 and ordered Earlimart's Clay Avenue well onto standby. In late May 2020, the town's other well — the roughly 50-year-old Mary Ann well — failed outright, triggering a boil-water notice that lasted about 10 days before bacteria tests cleared it; the underlying TCP problem, unrelated to the bacteria, remained. A 2012 lawsuit against Dow, Shell, and Wilbur-Ellis over the TCP contamination produced a $5.7 million settlement in February 2019 — money the Earlimart Public Utility District had earmarked for a new well and TCP treatment, but which, as of the most recent reporting we reviewed, remained unspent while the district searched for a site. The district — which runs on less than $900,000 in annual revenue with two to three staff — applied in January 2019 for state assistance to replace the Mary Ann well and had not received a response as of the reporting date; Self-Help Enterprises and the State Water Board were discussing support as of late May 2020.

Impact — what we know, and what we don't

- **Current status of the $3.8 million earmarked for a new well:** Unconfirmed past "unspent, searching for a site" as of the most recent reporting we found (2020) — we don't know if this has since been resolved.
- **Whether the state ever responded to Earlimart's 2019 assistance application:** Not confirmed.
- **Current TCP levels and whether any interim treatment is in place:** Not established in this pass.

Part of a larger pattern

Earlimart is this project's strongest "court case" story in Tulare County — a real settlement, with real money, from the companies that caused the contamination. It's also a caution against mistaking a settlement for a fix: $5.7 million won in 2019 didn't translate into a working well by the time the most recent reporting we found was published. It connects directly to **Corcoran's** still-unresolved Kings County lawsuit and the broader regional pattern of Shell- and Dow-linked TCP litigation across the San Joaquin Valley, including the Arvin-Edison Water Storage District's separate $230 million Kern County settlement over the same chemical (one of several parallel Kern County groundwater-banking TCP suits against Dow and Shell; Semitropic and North Kern Water Storage Districts have pending cases of their own, and Rosedale-Rio Bravo and Kern Delta are paused in negotiation).

Sources

- The Fresno Bee (Monica Vaughan), via Self-Help Enterprises, "What happens when a California town's drinking water system fails? Ask Earlimart" (July 8, 2020) — confirms the $5.7 million settlement figure directly.
- EcoWatch, "Shell, Dow Hid Cancer-Causing Chemical in Pesticides, Contaminating Drinking Water for Millions."
- SJV Water (Lois Henry), "Kern water district gets $230 million to settle contamination lawsuit" (March 10, 2026) — names the Arvin-Edison Water Storage District specifically, not a generic "Kern County water district," and the other pending Kern County TCP suits.

What we couldn't independently confirm this pass: a specific court name or case/docket number for Earlimart's own 2012 lawsuit against Dow, Shell, and Wilbur-Ellis — the Fresno

Bee's reporting confirms the settlement amount and date but not the filing details. Worth a direct Tulare County Superior Court records check as a follow-up.

Full citation detail and source archive: **Data**. Back to **water insecurity in the Central Valley**.
