Blanco toasts fresh water

Governor visits area where high levels of arsenic were found.
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COW ISLAND — On the steps of the church where he and his parishioners have prayed for clean drinking water, the Rev. Bill Rogalla greeted the governor with a smile.

“We welcome to ‘The Islands,’” the community priest told her. The governor’s presence meant the community’s prayers had been answered. She had come to turn on the water, running fresh from public water lines.

Moments later, Gov. Kathleen Blanco praised Rogalla’s efforts to unify the community for a common goal — to get clean public water lines extended to area homes, where several private water wells are contaminated with arsenic.

“We heard the community’s plea for help,” Blanco said Wednesday at a ceremony dedicating the new water lines.

Homes along about a two-mile stretch in this highly rural area are hooking in to public water lines for the first time, thanks in large part to emergency funding from Blanco’s office.

A $100,000 grant from her Office of Rural Development helped get water quickly to the areas that need it the most — the places where tests of private water wells have shown the highest levels of arsenic.

Gene Sellers, engineer for the Waterworks District 1, right, watches Wednesday as Gov. Kathleen Blanco turns on the water for the St. Anne Church rectory, the first in phase one of the fresh water project.

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Water

“An opportunity to bring clean, healthy water to a community,” Blanco said. “It’s about a lot more than turning a valve on.”

The emergency project, which serves an area south of Kaplan from Five Oaks Grocery up to just past St. Anne’s Catholic Church, cost a total of $250,000. The remaining funds came from other grants and loans.

The parish line serves about 37 customers.

Officials decided to get water to that area first after tests last fall by the state Department of Environmental Quality and The Daily Advertiser showed unsafe levels of the cancer-causing arsenic there.

Officials from all levels of government came together to fund the project, including state Sen. Nick Gautreaux, D-Meaux, several Vermilion Parish police jurors, and representatives from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Louisiana Office of Rural Development.

Construction on the emergency line began in June and was complete two months earlier than expected.

“The miracle of all miracles when you’re dealing with government is to finish ahead of schedule,” Blanco said.

Another larger water line project is in the planning phase, officials said. It will cost about $6.3 million and serve 900 new customers. Construction is set to begin within the next 12 to 18 months.

After Blanco turned a metal rod to open the water valve, the group toasted with glasses of the cool, fresh water.

“It’s good water. The priest can use it to baptize kids now,” said resident Wilman Gaspard, jokingly.

Rogalla, who first alerted the community that its water had unsafe arsenic levels that could be making people sick, said having clean water is exciting.

“It’s amazing to brush your teeth and not have to hold your nose,” Rogalla said.