

The Porterville Recorder

Water flows to dry home

August 24, 2016

By Myles Barker



The Ramirez family, Tania, left, Guillermina, and Leonicio, right, hold pitchers of clean water Friday at their house in East Porterville. The Ramirez residence is the first house to be hooked up to the City

Hundreds of households in East Porterville have been without a sustainable source of water, but now with the first home getting connected Thursday to the City of Porterville's water system, many more connections are on the way.

Tania Ramirez, the daughter of the family whose house was the first to be connected, said she is relieved after having had to get by without potable water for two years and with a water tank for one.

"For two years my dad would go all the way to Terra Bella to get tanks and with that we would shower, wash dishes, and pretty much everything," said Ramirez, who is majoring in business administration at Fresno State. "After we got the tank we would shower more regularly, but we still knew we didn't have water for as much time as other people."

Ramirez said because the state would only fill the tank halfway, she and her mom and dad had to remain alert at how much water they were using and to use it as sparingly as possible.

"There are a lot of people right now that are in my situation as of now, and I am helping us out, I thank everyone who worked hard for today and glad that we are going to get water back."

Water problems in East Porterville date back to the drought years of 2013-2015 when groundwater levels in the unincorporated area declined significantly, causing many household wells to go dry. As a result, residents have had to rely on deliveries of bottled water and non-potable water held in large tanks temporarily installed on their property, costing the state more than \$650,000 a month.

Assemblyman Devon Mathis (R-Visalia), said it has been a long time in the making, but he is glad that he and others working in the city, county, and the state have been able to make the dream of getting East Porterville residents with potable water a reality.

"This is communities coming together, people coming together, and saying that we have to do something about this and we have to do it now," Mathis said. "We need to stop talking about it and stop talking about all the different problems and start talking about how we are going to come together and what we can bring to the table and get it done, which is what we see here today."

Mayor Milt Stowe said it was an honor being in the presence of the first family to be connected to the city's water system, and hopes more families will be able to get access.

"It has been a short time coming, but for the residents in this area it probably seems like centuries, but we are very pleased," Stowe said. "A project of this magnitude takes a multitude of people and agencies and I want to thank each and every one of them for putting this together. From the bottom of my heart, I thank you and I appreciate what you have done for this community."

Tomas Garcia, a member for East Porterville for Water Justice, who has been without potable water for over two years, said his life as well as others in the same situation have been a disaster and hopes the water connections will open the eyes for other families living in East Porterville and beyond.

“Not only for this family, but for a lot of the families in East Porterville, I want to thank you guys from their hearts,” Garcia said. “We are moving forward to a new future, and this is the first step for East Porterville to go forward and to open the doors for other communities. The only way to make that happen is to stay together.”

Families wishing to connect with the city’s water system will first need to sign a consent form and an Extraterritorial Service Agreement, both of which are available at City Hall and the Drought Resource Center and are due on Sept.

1. Secondly, they must establish a water account with the city.

The connections are being paid for by the state, but those hooked up will face a monthly city water bill. They must also agree to cap their existing well.

Those who refuse to connect will have their emergency water tank removed from their property and will no longer receive emergency bottled drinking water from the State.

Jessi Snyder, community development specialist for Self-Help Enterprises, who has been working with Tulare County OES in helping getting families with a dry well not only get connected to the City’s water system, but also water tanks as part of the Emergency Tank Replacement Project, said she is happy that the project is finally rolling and can’t wait to connect more.

“I have worked on quite a few water projects and this has been a very unique project in the sense that it is actually happening much more quickly than water projects usually take, but also because it has just been such a fun collaboration with so many partners, and I really love to see how everybody can come together,” Snyder said. “It is also important to recognize that people were suffering for a while before we got our act together for a response so a lot of people have been suffering for a good four years straight, but the last couple of years have been better, and starting today we will make the future better too.”

Snyder said the Ramirez family is one of 70 properties that will be connected in Phase 1A of the East Porterville Water Supply Project, all of which are located next to existing city water mains. City Public Works Director Mike Reed said the work will “ramp up” late next week or the following week and it shouldn’t take that long to complete all 70 connections.

The plan is to have 500 homes connected to new distribution systems by the end of 2016 as part of Phases 1B to 1E.

Snyder said the project, which is a joint effort by the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB), the Department of Water Resources (DWR) the Governor’s Office of Emergency Services (Cal OES), the County of Tulare and the City of Porterville, expects to connect an additional 1,300 households regardless if their wells are dry in Phase 2 of the project, which starts in 2017.

Snyder said an estimated 200 property owners have turned their consent forms in, and hopes more will follow, and not pass up a once in a lifetime opportunity to get a valuable resource connected at no charge.

Eric Lamoureux, the director at Cal OES, said connecting the first house with a reliable water source is a great thing, and is looking forward to continuing to work hard over the next year and a half to make sure that the company stays on track to meet all the ambitious objectives to help more East Porterville residents.

“It is phenomenal for this family, and it was a phenomenal, great day for the other residents of East Porterville that will soon have a reliable water source that they really deserve,” Lamoureux said.

For more information on how to get connected to the city’s water system, contact the East Porterville Drought Resource Center at (866) 284-5142 or Porterville City Hall at (559) 782-7499.