

The Fresno Bee

Family rejoices at 'regular' water flowing from the tap.

August 23, 2016

By Lewis Griswold



Tania, Guillermina and Leonicio Ramirez triumphantly hold pitchers of water after their East Porterville home was hooked up to Porterville's municipal water system. Theirs was the first home in a new project to bring a reliable water system to the unincorporated town.

EAST PORTERVILLE

The Ramirez family turned on a faucet Friday, and for the first time in three years in the midst of the California drought, experienced an everyday occurrence: hassle-free running water.

As state officials and supporters clapped and cheered, the Ramirezes filled pitchers with clear, cool water and smiled broadly.

"We know we're going to have water from here on," said Guillermina Ramirez, speaking in Spanish.

Theirs is the first home to be connected to a Porterville city water main that runs under the street they live on, under a state program bringing drought relief to beleaguered residents of East Porterville whose wells went dry in the drought. The state Department of Water Resources is paying for the hookup program to as many as 1,800 homes.

TODAY, WE'RE FINALLY GOING TO TAKE COMFORTABLE SHOWERS AND DO THINGS NORMALLY LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.

Tania Ramirez, East Porterville

Homeowner Leonicio Ramirez is a farm laborer. He said three fruit trees died at his home for lack of water in the drought.

Three years ago, the well went dry and water stopped flowing at the Ramirez home. At least once a week for two years, he would haul water in jugs to the home.

"It was very stressful," he said. "To shower, I would heat water on the stove and take it to the bathtub and pour it on me."

A year ago, the family got a front yard water tank, which has become something of a symbol of the drought. It is hooked up to the home plumbing.

The tank brought a measure of normalcy, but it was imperative to use water sparingly, as the tank was partially filled once a week, said Tania Ramirez, 20, a student at Fresno State.

"Today, we're finally going to take comfortable showers and do things normally like everyone else," Tania said. Assemblyman Devon Mathis, R-Visalia, was among several city and state officials and nonprofit agency representatives who came to the Ramirez home to see the water tap turned on for the first time and to shovel dirt onto the water line laid Thursday.

Many homes in East Porterville and the central San Joaquin Valley have been without reliable water for too long, Mathis said.

“I haven’t seen stuff this bad since I was in Iraq,” he said. Mathis is a former Army National Guard sergeant who was injured in Iraq in 2008 when a roadside bomb exploded as his unit went by.

Multiple meetings with state officials produced the effort to hook up city water to East Porterville, he said.

IT’S BEEN A LONG TIME COMING. TODAY IS JUST THE BEGINNING.

Eric Lamoureux, California Office of Emergency Services

Under the program, property owners must agree to be annexed into the city someday. The state will pay the hookups costs, estimated at about \$5,000 per home, according to the nonprofit group Self-Help Enterprises, which is involved in the contracts to get the hookups installed.

For decades, an existing water main went from the city to parts of East Porterville, serving several homes there. But new hookups required Porterville City Council approval – suspended in the drought – and fees and costs borne had to be paid by the property owners in an area that has many pockets of poverty.

The state program will hook up 70 homes right away as the East Porterville Water Supply Project proceeds in phases. About 500 homes will be hooked up in the first phase, and up to 1,300 additional homes will be connected during a second phase next year, according to the state.

“It’s phenomenally great for East Porterville,” said Eric Lamoureux, acting deputy director of the state Office of Emergency Services. “It’s been a long time coming. Today is just the beginning.”

Once the hookups are done, the state will stop water deliveries to affected homes. That project is costing \$650,000 a month.