

OUR VALLEY VOICE

California water board orders mandatory solution to East Oroshi water situation

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After more than a decade of East Oroshi residents struggling without clean drinking water, the State Water Board on Tuesday took a huge and critically necessary step by issuing a mandatory consolidation order for a neighboring district to connect East Oroshi to safe water, ushering in the long-overdue promise of safe drinking water for the marginalized Tulare County community.

East Oroshi, a rural community in the San Joaquin Valley with about 700 residents, has fought for reliable access to safe drinking water for more than 10 years. Residents currently receive drinking water from the East Oroshi Community Services District (EOCSD). But long-term nitrate contamination of their groundwater supply, combined with a limited capacity to confront these challenges, led the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) to order a voluntary consolidation with neighboring Oroshi Public Utilities District (OPUD) in July 2018, as the most cost-effective and sustainable solution to restore their access to safe drinking water. The Board also informed both parties that the order would become mandatory if they failed to reach an agreement on their own by early 2019.

On Tuesday, Oct. 27, more than 2 years later and with little evident progress towards a voluntary consolidation, the Board took important and necessary action and issued a mandatory consolidation order, requiring the two districts to get it done by the end of 2024. This marks only the fourth time that the Board has issued a mandatory consolidation since the passage of Senate Bill 88 in 2015, which gave the state authority to order such consolidations.

“This order is reason to celebrate and shows that the State Water Board has clearly heard and responded to the East Oroshi community,” said Ryan Jensen, Community Solutions Senior Manager for Community Water Center. “There will continue to be a lot of work to do in the coming months and years. This process must continue to move forward with urgency as there are still key steps left in the process and we don’t want to see this process stall out any longer. The people of East Oroshi have waited long enough.”

Community Water Center has been working alongside East Oroshi residents for more than 10 years, along with Self Help Enterprises and Tulare County leaders, including informing residents about the consolidation since 2018 so that they can engage with local and state officials to bring reliable drinking water to their community.

“I am happy to see this sign of progress and that we will accomplish what we’ve been hoping for,” said Benedicto Cazares, an East Oroshi community member. “But we know the struggle will continue for us to make it a reality.”

Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero, who represents both communities, has been a key leader in driving this project.

“Water is an essential component to everyday life and no one should be denied access to it,” Valero said. “For over 10 years, East Oroshi has inherited a broken water system. This system has made

young children realize that water comes from a bottle and not from the tap. Yet, I am thankful that change is coming to the East Oroshi community as a result of a recent mandatory State Water Resources Control Board consolidation. This consolidation will bridge East Oroshi into Oroshi's water system so that all members of our extended community have safe, affordable, and clean drinking water in the years to come. We see you, East Oroshi."

Susana De Anda, Co-Founder and Executive Director for Community Water Center, said these consolidation projects are vital and must be adopted in other areas where clean water is scarce.

"In addition to East Oroshi, there are many other communities in need of consolidation who are also fighting for clean water for their families," De Anda said. "Community Water Center continues to urge the State Water Board to keep making progress for these communities. We recognize the Board's leadership today and look forward to continued partnership in making safe, clean, and affordable drinking water a reality for all Californians."