

NGO GROUNDWATER COLLABORATIVE

Vickie Ortiz with Fairmead community & friends

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By: Staff

Victoria “Vickie” Ortiz is a Fairmead community advocate and member of Fairmead Community and Friends, a local organization dedicated to supporting health justice, safer environments, and community resource development.

Written in collaboration with Vickie Ortiz, Angela Islas and Sonia Sanchez from Self-Help Enterprises.

While most Californians enjoy the convenience of having water to drink, cook and clean, many communities, including the small underrepresented communities in California’s San Joaquin Valley, face water scarcity challenges. In

Fairmead, CA, an unincorporated community 12 miles north of Madera, CA, there are approximately 1,400 residents, with 200 residents connected to the community well and the remaining residents on domestic private wells. Though demographics have shifted, Fairmead continues to be a predominantly community of color. In the 1950’s and 1960’s Fairmead was primarily African American. Today, the community is approximately 70% Hispanic and 7% African American.

The community of Fairmead was hard hit by the last statewide drought which lasted between 2012 and 2016. To this day, Fairmead continues to experience the impacts of declining groundwater levels. Victoria “Vickie” Ortiz and her family experienced first-hand the water challenges exacerbated by the most recent drought. In the summer of 2016, Vickie’s well went dry for over a year and a half. Unfortunately, this did not come as a surprise, as many of her neighbors with shallow wells had also gone dry. A growing demand of water for crop irrigation, coupled with the drought, led to groundwater overdraft.

In the last six years, there have been hundreds of acres of almonds planted in and closely around the community of Fairmead, which has contributed to declining water levels. In 2010, Vickie’s neighbor planted 60 acres of almonds and two years later, another neighbor planted 19 acres on their land. Vickie sought help to restore the water supply in her well, but as a domestic well owner, she was informed that it was her family’s responsibility to lower the well’s pump – a cost that can run between \$15,000 and \$45,000. As a low-income community where 30% of the people live below the poverty line, this is an exorbitant cost many families cannot afford.

“I couldn’t believe that there wasn’t anyone in Madera County that could help me because it was my private well and my responsibility to get the water I needed for me and my family to live.”-Vickie Ortiz



As more wells went dry in Madera County, the County established an emergency interim water tank program funded by the California Disaster Assistance Act. Vickie was placed on a list to receive a water tank where water was delivered. During the period before receiving the interim tank many families, including Vickie's, had to take showers using 5 gallon buckets. She also purchased bottled water whenever possible as she worried about the possibility of being without water to cook and drink. Her family saved every drop of water and found ways to make the most of this crucial resource. After a year and a half with the interim water tank, Vickie applied with Self-Help Enterprises, a non-profit community development organization, for a new well and qualified at no cost to her family.



Fairmead community gathering (prior to COVID pandemic).

However, Vickie remains concerned about her well going dry in the future as growers continue to plant more orchards in Fairmead. Back in 2014, Fairmead residents informed public officials of their concerns regarding the community well not producing as it once did and that private wells in the community were also running dry. The community requested a second well to help keep a storage tank full for an emergency backup supply of water. Instead, the community was placed on a Stage 4 requirement – a warning to limit water use. In August 2020, after years of planning, the Madera County Board of Supervisors approved an engineering contract to design and manage upgrades to the water system, including a new well.

“There isn’t any infrastructure in our community, no sewer system, no sidewalks, no community center to meet or green space parks for our children to play. The nearest store is 5 miles away and we wonder if the community well is one cupful of water away from going down.”

The water issues impacting Fairmead were only part of the challenges that inspired Vickie to become a community advocate. Since 2011, Vickie has been volunteering and serving as a Board Member secretary of a 501c3 nonprofit named Fairmead Community and Friends. The nonprofit's vision is to make Fairmead a better place to live by advocating for health justice, safer environments, and community resources. Through this community involvement, Vickie became engaged in the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) groundwater sustainability planning in Madera County and participated in the Madera County Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) Advisory Committee for two terms. Throughout the process, Vickie made sure to be a resource, sharing information and gathering feedback from other members of her community.

Despite COVID-19 restrictions limiting in-person meetings and engagement, the availability of virtual meetings has helped increase Vickie's participation in the local GSA Advisory Committee by reducing barriers like access to transportation and meeting times. Additionally, Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) and Leadership Counsel for Justice & Accountability (LCJA) have provided technical assistance facilitating access to educational resources and coordinating meetings between Vickie and representatives from Madera County to ensure meaningful participation. Vickie has been able to engage in local policy development including the Madera County GSAs water allocation policy where she advocated for the inclusion of language for fair and equitable allocations specifically for domestic well owners and small water systems serving disadvantaged communities.



Vickie Ortiz (center left) and Fairmead community members.

“I refer to myself as a statistical dot on the chart of the private wells that went dry in Madera County during the last drought. As someone who has also lived in cities, I understand that we don't always worry about where our water comes from other than the faucet.”

Most recently, with the support of SHE, Vickie served as a panelist in a legislative briefing coordinated by the California State Assembly Committee on Water, Parks, and Wildlife where she shared her experiences and expressed the critical need for technical assistance funding to rural communities. Vickie is committed to continue advocating and highlighting water issues and the needs of her community to legislators and local leaders. With the support of NGOs like SHE and LCJA, Vickie will continue being part of the solution by staying engaged in local groundwater sustainability issues and advocating for resources that empower her community.