

VISALIA TIMES DELTA

East Orosi one step closer to clean water as Tulare County moves to become administrator

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East Orosi is one step closer to achieving clean drinking water, a basic human right that is denied to many of California's disadvantaged communities, particularly in the rural San Joaquin Valley.

Last Tuesday, the Tulare County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to take steps to become the manager of the small agricultural community's water board. That means the town of about 500 will soon have the financial resources and technical know-how to gain clean water.

"It's very unacceptable, especially in 2021, that these communities in our own state have to deal and suffer from this inequity," said Supervisor Eddie Valero, who represents East Orosi. "If there is any time where this possible the time is now because of the [state's] emphasis on water."

For years, nonprofits such as Self Help Enterprises have delivered bottled water to East Orosi every two weeks through a state grant. But, the supply is rarely enough to meet a family's water needs.

"I've said this time and time again, imagine youth growing up only knowing water comes from a bottle and not the kitchen tap," Valero said. "This is our [the county's] responsibility, too, as a willing and able partner working along with the state to deal with this pressing problem."

East Orosi, nestled at the base of the Sierra Nevada, has long struggled with nitrate contamination in its water. Flanked on all sides by vast citrus groves, fertilizer seeping into the ground after decades of cultivation has poisoned the aquifer below with nitrates.

The county's Resource Management Agency will work with the State Water Board to determine what is needed to bring East Orosi's water system back into compliance. Once the work is completed, management of the local board will be returned to residents.



Pedro Cazeras of East Orosi pays \$65 a month for water he can't safely drink. He and dozens of other aggrieved residents attended a Bakersfield rally on Tuesday in support of the Safe and Affordable Drinking Water Fund, which they see as an answer to California's clean drinking water crisis.

"The appointment of a capable local agency to administer the community's water system and its consolidation with Orosi is an important tool to provide the needed support to East Orosi so that residents can get one step closer to finally having safe drinking water," said Ryan Jensen with the Visalia-based Community Water Center, who helped put East Orosi's water issues on the map.

"We are in support of the process, and grateful for the ongoing collaboration between the State Water Board, Tulare County, and other local partners."

Consolidation a solution?

In 2018, the State Water Board identified East Orosi as a candidate for consolidation with nearby Orosi, a much larger water system. By connecting the two communities, advocates say, East Orosi would have access to clean water and Orosi would have more rate-payers to fund operations.

The piping and infrastructure needed to connect the two towns would be covered by a state grant, and Orosi customers would not pay more for their monthly water bills by law.

East Orosi customers now pay just \$17 a month for water service and would likely see a rate increase to bring their bills in line with other Valley communities.

Orosi Public Utility District officials dragged their feet and delayed negotiations with East Orosi Community Services District until it became clear to state officials that a mandatory consolidation was necessary.

To date, the state has only forced four consolidations. State officials prefer the process to happen voluntarily but a 2015 law allows the state board to mandate a connection after other options have been exhausted.

Matheney Tract in Tulare was the first community to be forced to consolidate.

State officials believe that Tulare County serving as East Orosi's administrator will help move the consolidation process along, though East Orosi would remain responsible for the operation and maintenance of its water system.

"A lot of the small water systems don't have the resources to apply for state funding. East Orosi doesn't have the technical, managerial or financial capacity to run a project [and Tulare County does]," said Caitlin Juarez with the State Water Board. "The goal is to implement long-term solutions, and in East Orosi the long-term solution is hopefully consolidation."

A state-imposed deadline for the consolidation is set for December 2024, though it's unclear what will happen if the date is missed.

Valero, the county lawmaker, said that isn't an option. He believes it will take two years to lay the pipes and complete the infrastructure project once an agreement is reached.

Juarez said there's no timeline on when negotiations will be completed.

In the meantime, East Orosi residents such as Benedicto Cazares continue to wait for a solution that will bring their families safe drinking water — nine years after former Gov. Jerry Brown led California to become the first state to legally recognize water as a human right.

"I am happy to see this sign of progress and that we will accomplish what we've been hoping for," Cazares said in October. "But we know the struggle will continue for us to make it a reality."