

THE SUN GAZETTE

Virtual event highlights water issues in the Valley

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By: Reggie Ellis

Self-Help Enterprises' virtual water tour will spotlight five communities in five different counties via Facebook Live

VISALIA — It was just a year ago residents in Seville, an unincorporated community in northern Tulare County, were able to drink water from their taps for the first time in five years.

In May 2020, the state lifted the boil water advisory for the 100-home community located seven and a half miles east of Oroshi after the county of Tulare rebuilt the water system, in part, with funding from the state following a campaign coordinated by the county, the Stone Corral School District, and local non-profits. Prior to drilling a new well, installing a new water tank and replacing water lines throughout the community, much of the system was leaking as the water lines were nearly 100 years old while the water running through them was contaminated with high levels of nitrates. Seville's water system was so bad, it drew international attention in 2011 as a focal point on water quality issues in the San Joaquin Valley in the UN Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, Mission to the United States of America (2011).

Not only did the county rebuild the system, it also handed it over to the community. A month after turning on the taps of clean water, the county transferred the system to the Yetttem-Seville Community Services District, formed by a vote of the two towns to tax themselves and pay for the system. The effort gave the gift of clean water but also self-governance to the townspeople and alleviated the county from subsidizing the system at a \$24,000 annual loss.

The story of Seville's solution to its water problems is part of a five-part virtual water series being streamed on Facebook Live by Self-Help Enterprises (SHE), which played a crucial role in Seville's success. The virtual water tour explores the many 'water access' challenges facing the San Joaquin Valley's rural residents. SHE staff will be interviewing five extraordinary community leaders as they share how they overcame hardships and brought sustainable water solutions to their communities. Each will stream live at 7:30 p.m. Seville's story aired on July 1 under the topic of "Managing a New Water System." Follow SHE on Facebook or click on this link fb.me/e/1ybCMgs5D to participate.

"This video series will provide a platform for community leaders to share their stories and discuss issues they've faced or are currently facing as a community," Eva Dominguez, SHE's Community Development Manager said. "It's also an opportunity to celebrate the community solutions and accomplishments brought forth by their collaborative efforts. The idea that was sprouted by community members to do an in-person tour was put on pause after the COVID-19 pandemic. We look forward to finally carrying out the tour and hope that folks tune in to learn about some great communities within the San Joaquin Valley."

While there are many stories like Seville in Tulare County, often considered the epicenter of water quality issues in rural areas, Self-Help's series spotlights stories in four other Valley counties. The series actually launched last month with "Contaminants and Community Solutions" focused on Fuller Acres in Kern County. The series continued on June 24, with "Access to Safe, Reliable Water for

Private Well Owners” and aired at 7:30 p.m. The Spanish language only webcast discusses the community of El Nido in Merced County.

The web series will continue on July 8 from Fairmead in Madera County, called “Importance of Community Engagement (in Spanish), and on July 15 in Armona in Kings County with a segment called “Water Treatment.”

People planning to tune in must follow the Self-Help Enterprises Facebook page. For questions about the tour, email Manuel Leon at manuel@selfhelpenterprises.org.

Self-Help Enterprises (SHE) is a nationally recognized community development organization whose mission is to work together with low-income families to build and sustain healthy homes and communities. The pioneer and leading provider of mutual self-help housing in the United States, SHE’s work today encompasses a range of efforts to build better homes and communities for farmworkers and other hard-working families. Since 1965, SHE has helped more than 6,400 families to build their own homes, rehabilitated over 6,300 unsafe homes, developed over 1,800 units of affordable rental housing, and has provided technical assistance for reliable access to safe drinking water and sanitary sewer infrastructures to more than 160 small communities. SHE’s commitment to providing resources and training for individuals builds capacity of highly effective leaders in communities that also promotes collaborative solutions for improving communities. These combined efforts have touched the lives of over 60,000 families, providing them security and stability and building more productive communities.