

MAVENS NOTEBOOK

After years of political clashes, is this Central Valley community finally on a path to clean water?

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Despite recent political momentum, the tiny Tulare County community of East Orosi remains without a clear path forward to solving its decades-long struggle with contaminated drinking water.

Disputes between local and state officials, coupled with deep divisions and infighting among local district water board members have thwarted efforts to clear up the community's water for many years.

Formal efforts to consolidate East Orosi's water system with the Orosi system have been underway since at least 2018, but little progress has been made.

The slow crawl towards a solution has left East Orosi residents in fear of their own tap water. Many rely on bottled water deliveries, despite living less than a mile from Orosi and its safe, clean water.

"Imagine children knowing that water only comes from a bottle and not from their own tap," said Eddie Valero, a native of Cutler-Orosi who now represents District 4 of the Tulare County Board of Supervisors.

"People are just tired; East Orosi residents go to Orosi, they frequent the restaurants, the supermarkets [and] also take their kids to schools in Orosi, they are part of the fabric of our communities."

What's wrong with East Orosi's water?

Since 2003, state and federal authorities have cited East Orosi for at least 99 clean water-related violations, according to online state water board records, including numerous nitrate-related violations.

Nitrates disrupt a blood cell's capacity to carry oxygen through the body. Infants are most vulnerable as nitrates can be absorbed into their bloodstream and cause "blue baby syndrome."

Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit organization, has helped the East Orosi and surrounding communities by delivering bottled water to residents through the use of a state grant, even going as far as installing plastic water tanks in homes that they refill every two weeks. They have even reimbursed homeowners who qualify for a new private water well.

However, this is not nearly enough to keep up with the demand for water. In 2022, Self-Help Enterprises estimated that around 8,000 wells would dry up in just a couple of years, with the cost to remedy this estimated clean-up cost of to be around \$1 billion over the next 20 years.

How did we get here?

East Orosi's long struggle for clean water has been fueled by years of political clashing between the neighboring Orosi Public Utility District (OPUD) and the California State Water Resources Control Board (CSWRCB), dysfunction by the East Orosi Community Services District (EOCSD) and, most recently, resistance from three OPUD board members who refused to leave office for several weeks, despite losing their reelection campaigns last year.

A new study, that was expected to be released Friday by the California State Water Board, examines the feasibility of consolidating seven rural water districts in Tulare County, including Orosi and East Orosi. Public comments can be submitted until March 13.

The feasibility study drops at a time when the state water board's Office of Public Engagement, Equity, and Tribal Affairs (OPEETA) have begun hosting meetings between seven water districts and their constituencies to discuss potential long-term and sustainable water solutions for rural communities in northern Tulare County.

The meetings will take place between Orosi, East Orosi, Cutler, Yettem, Monsoon, Seville and Sultana's water districts.

The meetings are being held to get community and local government feedback on the individual water issues affecting the seven communities to determine a potential regional water solution and is a part of the Safe and Affordable Funding for Equity and Resilience (SAFER) program.

At the first meeting on Feb. 26 at the Monson-Sultana School Cafeteria, Laurel Firestone, a member of the state water board, explained that while a regional water system solution is possible, it would require all seven communities to collaborate together to attract the most amount of funding from the state.

"In order to be able to be competitive for the kind of funding that's needed to develop a bigger regional infrastructure, we need the region to have a vision for what that looks like," Firestone said. "Not just be a band aid, but be something that lifts the whole region."

But bringing the various groups together under a united vision has proven easier said than done.

Particularly in East Orosi where recent political disputes and internal fighting grew loud enough to draw the attention of California's top law enforcement official, Attorney General Rob Bonta.

Three East Orosi board members made headlines earlier this year when they refused to accept their reelection losses and tried to force Tulare County to hold new elections. They continued to serve on the board even after the three candidates elected by voters were sworn in Dec. 6.

Bonta stepped in, ordering the members – Reynaldo Rivas, Maria C. Gonzalez and Johnny Sandoval – to step down under threat of legal action.

The board members quickly relented, stepping down in mid-January, but not before making some controversial changes to the board's rules and bylaws. According to the three candidates that defeated the incumbents – Alejandro Brito, Nancy Cerda Serna and Angela Ruiz-Alvarez – the changes added new requirements for elected members to serve in leadership positions.

"You tied our hands before we even got here and I don't understand why," said Serna during the Feb. 11 meeting. "I don't believe there was a need for an ordinance like that."

Both Serna and Ruiz-Alvarez called for the ordinance to be reviewed by a third-party counsel and questioned both the legality of the ordinance and the reasoning behind its implementation.

During a special meeting on Feb. 25, Board President Alex Marroquin said that the previous board passed the ordinance because they felt the three new incoming members were "coming in with maybe other desires."

Both Serna and Ruiz-Alvarez explained that they entered the election out of a desire to better represent the community and not because of ulterior motives.

"I want to be on this board, there's no hidden agenda, I want to do it because I wanted to give back to my community," Cerna said.

Board members agreed to revisit the issue at a still unscheduled meeting. But despite the effort's long track record of political gridlock, many involved remain hopeful that things will be different this time around.

"Thankfully, these conversations are coming back," Valero said, "hopefully to unite us once again in order to see a solution to the problems that exist."