

# SJV WATER

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## Contractor hired for \$13.5 million water system but East Orosi residents waiting for state to pull trigger

December 15, 2025  
By: Lisa McEwen



More than 15 months after Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a trio of bills to bring clean drinking water to homes in East Orosi, residents are still waiting for the project to break ground.

The 950 residents of the tiny northern Tulare County community got a bit of good news last month when the Tulare County Board of Supervisors voted to hire a contractor, West Valley Construction Company, to build the \$13.5 million water system more than a decade in the making.

But construction won't start until the state Water Resources Control Board first issues a Notice to Proceed.

"We are waiting for the state to give the go-ahead," said Denise England, Tulare County Grants and Resources Manager. England said she still anticipates the project will get the green light in early 2026 as long as two issues are resolved.

One is a requirement from the state to have 100% approval for right of entry from residents to install the water connection inside their homes.

Self-Help Enterprises, a Visalia-based non-profit, is leading this effort and at last count had agreements from more than 80% of homes.

The other piece is an agreement between the Orosi Public Utilities District and Orosi Unified School District regarding water supplied from a new well adjacent to a family education center. When the county purchased the property to build the well, it agreed to provide water to the center. That agreement needs to be ratified by the utilities district.

“It’s a tangled little web,” England said. “I was really hoping we could break ground before the end of the year. We are just waiting for the state to say ‘yes.’”

England said the project should take 500 construction days, concluding sometime in mid-2027. The first step will be construction of a test well, to be sure the community will have the right quality and quantity of water.

According to county documents, the well will need to produce about 1,200 gallons per minute.

The contract for East Orosi’s new water system includes:

Approximately 9,450 feet of 8-inch diameter distribution pipe;

- A new 360,000-gallon storage tank;
- Connections (meters and laterals) for approximately 101 existing homes and two commercial connections;
- Decommissioning and abandoning two nitrate-contaminated wells.
- History of water woes

East Orosi residents have had a long and complicated history in their quest for clean drinking water.

The impoverished community’s dilapidated water system often malfunctioned, delivering brown water full of pebbles. The water system administrator, East Orosi Community Services District, struggled to make a quorum at meetings and was accused of financial mismanagement.

East Orosi CSD also operated the community’s wastewater treatment system, which was in equally bad shape, causing residents to complain for years about sewage overflows in and around their homes.

Additionally, two community wells are contaminated with nitrates. The state Water Board has provided bottled water for more than a decade. In 2020, the Water Board ordered the city of Orosi to connect homes served by the East Orosi CSD as part of a forced consolidation for drinking water.

In 2022, the County of Tulare was named Full-Scope Water System Administrator. It received a \$13.5 million Expedited Drinking Water Grant in 2024 to rebuild East Orosi’s system. It also was named administrator of its wastewater system in 2024 thanks to AB 805, one of the bills Newsom signed into law.

## **Contract on the table**

On Tuesday, the Tulare County Board of Supervisors will consider another amendment to its agreement with the Water Board to increase the wastewater system project funding by \$388,976 to a total of more than \$1.3 million, extending the agreement from March 31, 2027 to Nov. 30, 2027.

England said residents can expect their septic tanks to finally be pumped by the end of the year as the county recently contracted with a septic tank pumping company to “get the problem properties done first and then the entire community will get pumped.”

The failure of a lift station and backed up holding tanks for solids created a smelly emergency in 2024.

“Hopefully there are no future emergencies once we get this work done,” she said.