

# THE SUN-GAZETTE

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## East Orosi's fight for water ripples across generations

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By: Darren Fraser



CUTLER-OROSI – In the town of East Orosi, residents have not had access to clean water in over two decades, and for Carlos Sanchez, a member of the East Orosi Community Services District, the fight to bring clean water to the community has become a generational battle.

“My mother said to me, ‘I don’t think I’m ever going to see (clean) drinking water for us,’” Sanchez said. “Sure enough, she passed away five years ago. That’s when I decided to take on the fight and try to see if there was a way we could fix the problem.”

Sanchez lives in East Orosi and is one of three board members of the East Orosi Community Services District (EOCSD). For over 20 years, East Orosi residents have not had clean drinking water. To this day, families receive five 5-gallon containers of water each week free of charge, although it is not enough.

“We live off of five 5-gallon containers of water every two weeks. Which is hard to do the basic things (like) wash our produce. The water we do have to use is contaminated,” Sanchez said.

Sanchez noted the containers of water don’t last very long, and it can make things like cooking hard to do when supply is limited.

“If you cook and wash your produce the way you’re supposed to...five of those containers don’t last you two weeks, so you end up having to buy, barter or find a way to get water,” he said.

Sanchez said each family is allotted the same water ration, regardless of the family's size. He said the operation began when his mother was alive and has been in effect for about 15 years.

Sanchez's mother, Angela, was one of the first East Orosi residents to fight for clean drinking water. An entire generation of residents have grown to adults without knowing what it is like to drink clean, non-contaminated water from the kitchen faucet.

For over five years, Sanchez has been fighting his mother's fight for clean drinking water. This is a fight filled with broken promises, delays and rank politics.

But the unavailability of clean drinking water is not the only water issue to bedevil East Orosi residents. The town lacks a sewer system; houses rely on septic tanks. Just last month, over the weekend of April 5, raw sewage backed up into three houses in the town. For Sanchez, this was just another incident in an interminable series of unpleasanties connected with the decrepit septic system.

"I get this really nasty smell in the summers," he said. "When it rains, there is some kind of weird backup. You get the stench of the fumes that come from the septic system."

Initially, Sanchez believed the problem was peculiar to his bathroom, and paid to have his bathroom redone.

"The problem still persists," he said, to this day. He said his neighbors experience the same smell.

### **EAST OROSI COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT**

The East Orosi Community Services District is dysfunctional. For Sanchez and for many East Orosi residents, a portion of the problems start and end with the sole EOCSD employee, Lucy Rodriguez, who collects payments for the district.

Speaking of Rodriguez, Sanchez said, "We had a failure with the employee working for us. (She) is a complete negative. We have to deal with all these problems and on top of that, we have to deal with a person who is in it for the money and doesn't care about us."

On Aug. 31, 2023 – the last time the EOCSD Board had a meeting – Tulare County Supervisor Eddie Valero, members from Community Water Center (CWC), Vecinos Unidas (Neighbors United) and more than 30 East Orosi residents marched from the Templo La Paz Mennonite Brethren church to the EOCSD office (a trailer) to demand the removal of Rodriguez.

Residents complained that Rodriguez charged different fees for service; that she overcharged or failed to provide explanations for charges; that she routinely verbally abused residents; and that she issued handwritten receipts that differed from printed receipts. Protestors presented the Board with a petition with 148 signatures demanding Rodriguez's removal. She is still employed.

As for no board meetings in over eight months, Sanchez said this is due to lack of quorum. The board is supposed to have five members; it has three. In order to have a quorum, all three members must be present, which has not happened.

### **A LEGACY OF LETDOWNS**

Sanchez said when his mother was fighting the fight, East Orosi residents routinely received promises from Tulare County officials and Sacramento politicians that the town's water problems would be fixed. He said he is receiving the same empty promises to this day.

“We get dozens of promises that we’re going to get this, going to get that,” he said. “And every two years, we hear, ‘It’s going to take longer.’”

When asked who makes these promises, Sanchez said, “Everyone who works in the system. They’ve been doing these exams and these tests and who’s going to do what and who’s going to get what. Then we have communities like Orosi and Cutler who only seek their own interests. They could care less if we got water. For them, it’s, ‘What am I going to get out of this? I want the rights to this. I want the rights to that.’”

Sanchez said the inevitable outcome of these discussions is that East Orosi does not receive satisfaction.

“We always get put aside,” he said. “We get postponed. I went to meetings in Sacramento and I asked, ‘Why?’ We’ve been promised water for a long time. We still don’t have water. And now you’re telling me this is going to take two more years?”

At the last meeting he attended in Sacramento, Sanchez told officials, “Now I’m concerned I won’t live to see this through.”

Sanchez said he is grateful for the help that Community Water Center and Self-Help Enterprises has given the community in its fight for clean water. Even still, he added that life is simply different for East Orosi residents and noted his frustrations.

“They (CWC, Self-Help) are not the ones who live in this community,” he said. “They’re not the ones who have to struggle with not having enough water and having to shower with contaminated water. Let us hope that things will happen, but I don’t know if I will ever see it.”

Sanchez said the issue is not limited to the absence of clean drinking water. He believes the water in East Orosi is directly responsible for health problems in the community, including his own.

According to the California Department of Public Health, the California Cancer Registry does not calculate cancer incidence rates by city.