

FRESNOLAND

Okieville water recharge project a 'poster child' of partnership to protect residential water

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More than 40 engineers, landowners, water officials and drinking water advocates gathered along the banks of a full, flowing canal in Tulare County Thursday to inaugurate the Okieville Recharge Basin.

But the first order of business on the hot summer day was snow cones.

The 21-acre project is a “poster child” of partnership that will yield multiple benefits, Tulare Irrigation District manager Aaron Fukuda said. But like most construction projects, it didn’t come without delays or obstacles.

“This project epitomizes how people worked together and did not give up,” he said of the nine-year effort.

Fukuda said he was first approached by Paul Boyer, former executive director of Self-Help Enterprises, in 2015, the height of a multi-year drought. Boyer and his staff were working with

residents of Okieville, a community of about 100 residences whose domestic wells faced declining groundwater levels and quality.

Boyer noticed homes on the south side of Okieville had higher water levels and better water quality than homes to the north. He asked Fukuda for data to understand why.

Groundwater in the Kaweah subbasin moves to the southwest, flowing underground toward Corcoran and the Tulare Lake basin. Fukuda realized a Tulare Irrigation District recharge basin built in the 1950s was bolstering groundwater for some residents but not all.

He felt confident water stored in a new basin to the north could slide beneath Okieville, delivering a two-fold impact: Reliable supplies for residents and additional recharge for the district's growers. The new basin can store up to 1,400 acre-feet of water.

Finding grant money for the project proved difficult, but finally happened when the Mid-Kaweah Groundwater Sustainability Agency fast-tracked the project in the midst of being in "full SGMA mode," Fukuda said, and landed a grant from the Department of Water Resources funded by Proposition 68.

SGMA, the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act, requires groundwater sustainability agencies work together to bring over pumped aquifers into balance by 2040. One of SGMA's main goals is to protect domestic wells and drinking water for residents.

In the crowd Thursday were Stephen and Dana Fagundes, who ran a family dairy and raised their daughters on the parcel where the basin now sits. The couple took turns Thursday turning a valve to open the gates and flood the basin.

Stephen said they turned down a tempting offer from another buyer during the drawn-out funding process.

"If we had taken it, we would be retired now," he said. "But we made the decision that they needed the help."

"My kids grew up out here and we have lots of good memories," Dana said. "My kids were friends with a lot of children from Okieville."

Fukuda explained that the original Self-Help Enterprises partnership resulted in the [Okieville community transitioning](#) from individual domestic wells to a small community water system, including a new well, a back-up well, generators and a storage tank for fire flows, sandwiched between the two recharge basins.

Such projects only come about with discussion and cooperation, something that is key to Self-Help's mission, said Eddie Ocampo, director of the nonprofit's community sustainability arm.

"Identifying the solutions and vulnerabilities of the communities we serve is how we are going to get to sustainability here," he said. "We may not always agree on process, but this is very much a project that moves the needle. It's a good day to celebrate."