

Remember Me

Public notice ordered for Augustin Plain water plan

By Ollie Reed Jr. / Journal Staff Writer

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — A controversial proposal to pump 54,000 acre-feet of water each year from the Augustin Plains of west-central New Mexico up to the Middle Rio Grande Valley is a step closer to public hearings.

The New Mexico Office of the State Engineer has notified the Augustin Plains Ranch, the commercial venture behind the water-transfer plan, to publish a public notice of its application to pump and transport the water. That sets the stage for public hearings to be held after the public has had the opportunity to object to the plan.

That plan calls for Augustin Plains Ranch to drill 37 wells on the 17,000 acres of property it owns near Datil. The company says the property sits atop an aquifer with a volume of about 50 million acre-feet of water. An acre-foot is the amount of water it takes to cover an acre at a depth of one foot.

According to the company, water pumped from the aquifer would be delivered via a 140-mile-long pipeline to Bernalillo County and available for purchase by all users along the way to supplement water shortages, enhance stream flows and benefit fish and wildlife, including such endangered species as the silvery minnow.

Augustin Plains Ranch proposes to sustain the aquifer by building structures to capture rain runoff and snow melt from nearby mountains.

But many ranchers on the Augustin Plains are opposed to the project because they fear it will suck all the groundwater out of the basin, rendering their own wells useless and killing their livelihoods. Some environmentalists don't care for the plan either.

"This project is just another way to exploit our rivers and underground water sources in the same manner that has occurred for the past century," said Jen Pelz, director of the wild rivers program for WildEarth Guardians, a Santa Fe-based environmental organization. "While this project bills itself as increasing stream flows and ensuring water for endangered species on the Rio Grande, we do not support stealing water from another region to do so."

Instead, Pelz said water managers should concentrate on water conservation, agricultural efficiencies and reducing diversions.

In a statement released on Tuesday, project director Michel Jichlinski said the plan "will provide a sustainable source of water for generations of New Mexicans while securing habitats for protected endangered species and creating solid, economic benefits to local communities."

Jichlinski said it is also an incredible opportunity to make New Mexico a world leader in innovative water-resources development technologies.

The hearing phase, which could last a couple of years, will include a full and comprehensive study of the project area's hydrology and a presentation of plan outlining the project's benefit to local communities.

Augustin Plains Ranch must publish notice of its permit application within 60 days and publish it at least once a week for three consecutive weeks. The public can file objections up to 10 days after the final notice by writing to the Office of the State Engineer, 5550 San Antonio Drive NE, Albuquerque, NM 87109-4127, or faxing 505-383-4030.