

Plains designated a ‘most endangered place’

by [Irene Pittman](#) | March 28, 2013 | Filed under: [Opinion](#)

The Plains of San Agustin have been designated a “Most Endangered Place” by the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance, a statewide, private, nonprofit historic preservation organization. As an honorific listing, it does not create additional responsibilities or rewards for an individual or organizations interested in or involved with the resource in question. The list was designed to bring attention to historic, cultural and natural resources (such as the state’s water supply) that are endangered in some way and to encourage concerned individuals and organizations to develop methods for protecting those resources. Since 1999, the alliance has annually requested nominations to its Most Endangered Places list. Their annual meeting is April 11-13 at Eastern New Mexico University in Portales. For more information, see www.nmheritage.org.

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The Plains of San Agustin is a grassland west of Socorro and Magdalena, the remnant of a Pleistocene lake that disappeared at the end of the last ice age. It supports ranches large and small, as well as abundant wildlife. It is still possible to find original homestead houses and fences, as well as artifacts from Paleo Indian culture.

The West of old is alive and well here, but the new West is also much in evidence as exemplified by the presence of the Very Large Array. This facility represents a new frontier, the frontier of science and knowledge. What is good from the past resides side by side with what is good for the present and the future.

In 2007 an application to mine water by a New York-based corporation threatened the plains basin. The application asked permission of the Office of the State Engineer to pump 54,000 acre-feet of water each year from the underground aquifer through a pipeline to the Rio Grande near Socorro (a distance of about 60 miles) and thence to points north.

The water underlying the Plains is largely fossil water that cannot be replaced. The basin supplies underground flows of unknown magnitude southeasterly to the Rio Grande and southwesterly to the Gila River system. According to Frank Titus, who, with Dan Blodgett, wrote “Hydrogeology of the San Agustin Plains, New Mexico,” the basin is in a steady state, with 100,000 acre-feet of water per year both entering and leaving the basin.

The ultimate consequences of the proposed pumping are not clear. In addition to disrupting already existing underground flows to the Rio Grande and to the Gila River systems, the drying up of nearby wells would occur early on. Eventually such extreme pumping would lead to ground subsidence with no recovery from that disaster.

More than 1,000 formal protests were registered by the residents of the Plains and surrounding mountainous areas. The protestants, represented principally by Bruce Frederick of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, have won the first two rounds in court. The Office of the State Engineer dismissed the application in March 2012 on the grounds that it lacked adequate specificity. The applicant appealed the decision to the 7th

District Court, but in November 2012 Judge Matthew Reynolds again denied the application. That decision has been appealed to the New Mexico Court of Appeals.

Award of the MEP designation raises public awareness of the threat, and encourages support for the preservation of the Agustin Plains environment. For more information on the Agustin Plains water issue, contact Carol Pittman, 575-772-5866, or at pittray@gilanet.com.