

Water group briefed on Augustin Plains Ranch

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The application for a permit to pump 17 billion gallons of water per year from the San Augustin Plains aquifer under Socorro and Catron counties was the topic of discussion last Saturday at a meeting of the San Augustin Water Coalition. The Catron County based grassroots group was formed in 2008 to fight the acquisition of water planned by Augustin Plains Ranch LLC.

The application outlined a plan to pump 54,000 acre-feet per year and offer the water – via a pipeline – to northern New Mexico entities and communities, including Rio Rancho, whose city manager has shown interest.

That application is currently awaiting assessment by the Office of the State Engineer.

Guest speaker Gail Armstrong, Representative of the 49th Legislative District, told the group that it was her position that the state’s water laws needed revision.

“They have an effect not only on individual water rights but also on farming, ranching, oil and gas, uranium, mining,” Armstrong said. “It’s a really big picture.” What I’m trying to do is make it harder, a longer process, to examine the application process more before we start drilling wells all over the place. Especially in the area of the San Augustin Plains aquifer.”

Armstrong said she has met several times with Tom Blaine, the State Engineer.

“He asked me one day, well, what do you want? What do the people of Catron County, Socorro, everyone who has signed the petition, what do they want?” she said. “I said they want to save their water. They live in that area for a reason. They don’t want you to come in there, approve (an application that would) take the water out of their livelihood and their grandkids’ and their great grandkids’ livelihood, for the city of Albuquerque or Arizona. This is their livelihood.”

Armstrong said since January she is progressively learning about how things get done at the Legislature, and that having as much information as possible about the issue is imperative.

“I’m trying to educate myself more. I’ve been going to a lot of meetings. I’ve been doing a lot of research,” she said. “And I appreciate all the work New Mexico Tech Has done. What an outstanding group of people we have there.”

“I will be meeting again at the Office of the State Engineer, and want to be walked through the whole process from beginning to end,” she said. “What the State of New Mexico geologists are saying and what their (Augustin Plain Ranch LLC) geologists are saying are different. We need to find common ground and figure this out.”

“State Engineers will come and go, but we will be here forever. And I really believe that it does not need to be in one person’s hands,” Armstrong said. “I also believe we need a process that requires more vetting. This way is not right. This shouldn’t be happening.”

She expressed gratitude for being able to represent the 49th District and reiterated her approach in Santa Fe.

“I’m not there for party lines, I’m there for my constituents,” she said.

The Water Coalition was also given a presentation by Stacy Timmons, Interim Manager of the Aquifer Mapping Program the New Mexico Bureau of Geology and Mining Resources, who said preliminary results of a groundwater sampling campaign by hydrologists at the Bureau suggest that there is limited recharge occurring in the region of the San Agustin Basin.

“The ages of groundwater that we have collected within the San Agustin Plains, based on carbon-14 dates on groundwater, is on average about 12,000 years old,” Timmons said. Timmons has been collecting data for approximately seven years.

The San Augustin Plains-Upper Alamosa Creek aquifer mapping project includes geologic mapping, inventory of wells and springs, water level measurements (multiple years), water quality analysis, and data from precipitation weather stations.

Data collection involves sampling from 37 groundwater/springs locations and 16 surface sites.

“The samples are analyzed from major ions, trace metals and stable isotopes, oxygen and hydrogen,” she said.

Timmons pointed out that the eastern part of the aquifer has “little connectivity” with Upper Alamosa Creek. “Eastern San Augustin Plains leaks slowly westward, into western San Augustin Plains, and therefore it is not contributing any substantial groundwater to the Rio Grande aquifer,” she said. As for Eastern San Augustin Plains groundwater, “it gets very little recharge,” evidenced by the apparent 11,000 year old water (based on carbon-14 testing).

Hydrologist Sara Chudnoff, also from the Bureau of Geology, briefed the group on the Collaborative Groundwater Monitoring Network. “This project is a response to the needs of a state where there’s not a whole lot of water monitoring, especially in the rural parts,” Chudnoff said. “This is most all of the state.”