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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. (AP) — Plans to pipe billions of gallons of water from rural western New Mexico to more populated areas of the state are inching ahead again.

New Mexico's top water official has cleared the way for a public hearing to weigh the merits of the proposal being floated by Augustin Plains Ranch, LLC .

The company wants to drill more than three dozen wells capable of pumping more than 17 billion gallons of groundwater a year to supplement dwindling supplies in the Rio Grande Valley.

Project developers have suggested Albuquerque, Rio Rancho, Belen, Socorro and other municipalities in central New Mexico could benefit from having access to a new water source and commercial bulk water sales would be possible across more than a half-dozen counties.

Augustin Plains' first application was rejected two years ago after the state engineer determined the proposal was vague and its effects could not be reasonably evaluated. It was one of the most contested filings in the history of the state engineer's office.

Augustin Plains Ranch officials say the proposal can be vetted with a hearing. They likened it to the [San Juan-Chama](#) project, a decades-long effort that now supplies water to some of the state's largest cities.

"This is a very exciting time and we are very pleased with the state engineer's moving forward with our application," project director [Michel Jichlinski](#) said in a statement.

Environmental groups and other critics protested the first application in 2014 and have vowed to fight the new one as well.

Critics are concerned about the volume of water at stake and some describe the proposal as too speculative.

[Doug Meiklejohn](#), an attorney with the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, said the latest application by the developers does not include any specifics about who the actual water users would be, and only mentions that cities including [Albuquerque and Rio Rancho](#) are in the market for more water rights.

"It appears that the application suffers from the same lack of end user that was the basis for us getting it dismissed the first time," he said. "You can't speculate in water in New Mexico. It's illegal."

The law center represented about 80 people in the first case. Meiklejohn expects just as many to protest this time.

Developers argue that no water mining would occur. The plan calls for capturing runoff for recharging the aquifer beneath the San Augustin Plains west of Socorro.

Project developers say the water would eventually be discharged into the Rio Grande, potentially boosting flows for downstream users and endangered species.

Jichlinski said the developers want the communities around the Augustin Plains to be involved in the discussion.

The state engineer would ultimately have to approve the application.