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It's been nine years since Augustin Plains Ranch LLC first applied for a permit to drill 37 wells on the San Augustin Plains, that flat expanse straddling Socorro and Catron counties that was once called the "sea of grass."

Two test wells were drilled by the company in 2008, and a cursory study was done on the aquifer itself. The company's study showed that 50 million acre-feet per year was available. That figure has been debated by opponents of the project.

After the announcement last week by Augustin Plains Ranch, LLC that it has been given word by the Office of the State Engineer to submit a revised application to drill 37 wells on land it owns in Catron and Socorro counties, those opponents have begun speaking out again.

The most contentious issues are who has promised to buy the water, and the recharge of water lost in the San Augustin aquifer.

If approved, the permit would allow Augustin Ranch LLC to pump 6.9 billion gallons of water per day from the San Augustin aquifer and pump it via a pipeline for use by municipalities.

The company wants to pump the water from 37 wells on rangeland it owns in western Socorro and eastern Catron counties.

The original proposal — which has since been amended — asked for permission to divert and consumptively use 54,000 acre-feet of water yearly for domestic, livestock, irrigation, municipal, industrial uses. That has been replaced by the current application, posted Aug. 13 on the State Engineer website.

According to the as yet to be published legal announcement, the wells will be used "for municipal purposes including, but not limited to" the entities of Village of Magdalena, City of Socorro, City of Belen, Village of Los Lunas, Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority and the City of Rio Rancho, "and commercial bulk water sales in parts of Catron, Sierra, Socorro, Valencia, Bernalillo Sandoval and Santa Fe counties."

Doug Meiklejohn from the New Mexico Environmental Law Center said the latest application "suffers from the same defect as previous attempts. They don't have a specific buyer for the water."

At Monday night's meeting of the Magdalena Board of Trustees, Eileen Dodds of the San Augustin Water Coalition, recounted the company's previous attempts to acquire the groundwater rights.

"In 1968 Bruno Modena of Italy bought the land, which is 1.4 percent of the land mass on the plains," she said. "From then till now has done nothing with the land. He's never seen it. It has been leased it out to a rancher, and also hunters for elk and antelope."

When the first permit was applied for in 2007, "there were 250 protests from Catron County. That was the largest protest the state engineer has ever had. In 2008 he filed an amended application and 800 more protested," Dodds said.

A third application in 2012 was denied on grounds that it was speculative.

"It didn't include a specific use," she said. "They didn't have a confirmed buyer for the water as required by state law."

Another application in 2014 was rejected on grounds that it was also speculative.

Dodds said, "I'm here today to ask people of Magdalena to protest the application." She said if the permit is approved, the company is "gonna' dry it up and gonna' take the VLA with it."

Hydrologists at New Mexico Tech are currently mapping the San Agustin aquifer.

"Based on the groundwater ages we've reviewed," its 2014 report stated. "The groundwater in this region is quite old (on average 11,000 years old) and little recharge to the groundwater is observed."

That conclusion was echoed by Dodds, who cited studies from ranchers in the area that contend there is no discernible recharge in the area. She said ranching will die if the plan goes through. "It will be the end a 140 year way of life," Dodds said.

In a letter to the Chieftain earlier this week, hydrologist Dennis Inman of Magdalena stated that "the current average wellhead elevation in the plains is about 6,940 feet in elevation and the average water elevation is about 6,744 feet; but water depths are all over the place because of perched nature of these water tables, within the basin."

This is based on evaluating 100 wells associated with lower part of the plains.

"The APR's 30 plus wells will be pumping water from about 4,000 feet in elevation. This difference in elevation is beyond what the current adjacent land owners could ever afford. To deepen their wells to this depth is well beyond their economic means."

"Also water quality often from such depths has higher concentration of harmful minerals and much higher levels of salt. The southwestern part of the plains has a salt playa with high salt content in the wells in that area."

Inman contends the project would result in depletion of the whole groundwater aquifer; collapse of the perched aquifers in the northern part of the plains; differential settlement of the soils within the basin; probable damages to roads, homes and properties; devaluation of adjacent properties; and economic loss to Datil and the surrounding area, including "much of Catron and Socorro counties.

"This could also adversely affect reaches of the Gila and San Francisco Rivers," Inman writes.

The company's submitted legal notice states that the applicant (Augustin Plains Ranch LLC) "intends to construct enhanced recharge facilities which will collect runoff that would otherwise evaporate on the Plains of Augustin, recharge water that will augment the groundwater in the aquifer and offset the amount of water diverted from the Applicant's wells."

However, local hydrologists disagree, and contend the concept of "enhanced recharge" as described in the application comes from land surface "runoff" derived from local precipitation. As many locals have observed, they say they are seeing an increasing frequency and length of drought, and with this, runoff and potential recharge become less.

Hydrologists have recently reviewed groundwater storage changes in many alluvial aquifers around the state and the San Agustin Plains was included in that review.

It has an estimated decrease in groundwater in storage of 0.22 million acre feet over the last several decades (1970's to 1990's). While not as large of a decrease as other regions, even without massive pumping in the San Agustin basin, there has already been a decrease to groundwater in storage. This decrease likely continues to present time.

In another letter to the Chieftain, Cathie Eisen of Bent, New Mexico,, a certified water systems operator, argues that the math concerning recharge "doesn't make sense."

“It is easy to say you can pump 54,000 acre feet of water out of the ground every year and capture enough rain and snow to replenish it. Simple math says different,” Eisen states. “The proposal states they will ‘replenish a massive, underground aquifer with rainwater which is currently lost to evaporation.’ If they are to hold true to their promise of sustainability, that means they would have to not only receive enough rain and snowfall to replenish it they would also have to capture enough of it to accomplish that goal.”

Eisen writes, “The average annual rainfall for the Datil, New Mexico area is just over 14 inches per year which is the equivalent of 1.19 feet of water across one acre. One acre foot of water is the equivalent of 325,851 gallons, or in simpler terms, one foot of water over one acre of land. Using those numbers, 54,000 acre foot of water would be the equivalent of the total annual rainfall for the vicinity of the Augustin Plains Ranch over an area of almost...78 square miles.”