

Environmental group ask state to deny firm's request for water permit

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A Santa Fe-based environmental advocacy group is asking the state to deny a permit that would allow a company to draw about 17.6 billion gallons of water a year from the aquifer under a ranch in Catron County and pump it through a pipeline to communities farther north, calling the plan a “water grab.”

WildEarth Guardians filed a protest of the permit Thursday with the State Engineer's Office, arguing that the application filed by Augustin Plains Ranch LLC in 2014 fails to identify who would purchase the water and could deplete the Rio Grande, the Gila River and wildlife that relies on those rivers.

But the ranch says the plan will help supply water demands throughout the state.

The Augustin Plains Ranch, which lies about 150 miles southwest of Albuquerque, spans more than 18,000 acres and sits above an ancient lake that is believed to contain over 50 million acre-feet of water, according to the company hoping to launch the water project and a 1994 U.S. Geological Survey of the area.

The firm plans to drill 37 wells across the ranch property and pump 54,000 acre-feet of water annually — or 48 million gallons each day — which would be pumped, using hydroelectric and solar power, to areas in Catron, Santa Fe, Bernalillo, Sandoval, Socorro and Valencia counties through a 141-mile pipeline.

Project developers also have said in the past that some of the water could be piped into the Rio Grande.

“The Rio Grande is dying,” the firm says on its website.

This is the second time the firm has applied for a project permit. An application in 2007 was dismissed five years later after the state engineer ruled that the company hadn't met requirements for a state water permit application. The initial application also was met with opposition from tribal groups, local communities and the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, which represented at least 80 people protesting the project.

Doug Meiklejohn, director of the nonprofit law center, told *The New Mexican* in August that he expects at least that many people to protest the current application.

The Magdalena village council in Socorro County voted during a public meeting Monday to oppose the proposal.

The protest period for the current application closes Saturday.

The State Engineer's Office did not comment on the number of comments received by protesters but confirmed that those submitted for the 2007 application would have bearing on the current application.

“Our office hasn't made a final determination on the application. There will be a hearing on a future date,” said Melissa Doshier-Smith, a spokeswoman for the State Engineer's Office.

“The company who is building it is billing it as the savior of the Rio Grande that is going to help offset water scarcity in the basin,” said Jen Pelz, the Wild Rivers Program director for WildEarth Guardians. “The problem is, you are basically draining an aquifer that has been around for a very long time, and they have no idea what the impacts of draining that aquifer are going to be.”

WildEarth Guardians argues that the project would deplete the groundwater and surface water supply throughout the Augustin Plains. Not only would it potentially lower the levels of waterways in the area, but it also would compromise the habitat of endangered species, the group argues, such as the Chiricahua leopard frog, the Alamosa springsnail, the Rio Grande silvery minnow and the Southwestern willow flycatcher.

If the state allows the application to move forward after the protest period, a hearing will be set to address a water resource analysis, water-use conflicts and conservation and wildlife impacts, according to Augustin Plains Ranch LLC's project director, Michel Jichlinski.

WildEarth Guardians has urged the state engineer to deny the application before a hearing can begin.

Jichlinski said the company doesn't expect the project to deplete surface water sources, and he hopes it will aid the local community through tax revenues and new jobs.

"This project is a great opportunity for the area to develop a new and valuable resource and improve its economic and environmental conditions as well as those of the State," he said in the statement.