

WHO GETS TO DRINK? - Rural residents and El Paso face off over West Texas' most precious commodity

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Aquifers at center of West Texas battle

VALENTINE, Texas - Two visions of far West Texas' economic future clash here on the vast desert grasslands where cattle and coyotes outnumber people.

Rancher Hugh Howard recalls how a water well test sent a mighty, 3/ 4-mile stream flowing toward his place. The bounty gushed from the aquifer that he depends on to water his 200-plus head of thirsty Black Angus cattle under seemingly perpetual drought.

Trouble is, the city of El Paso hopes to uncork that well and 34 more so it can pump the water back home through a 150-mile pipeline.

"That one well wouldn't hurt us," says Mr. Howard, 66, before adding with a nervous chuckle, "but 35 might make a difference."

Rural-urban conflicts over water are playing out statewide, but few places define the stakes as sharply as far West Texas. The water that now nourishes this region's ranching and tourism industries is craved just as strongly by a booming El Paso border economy a world away.

And if water is necessary for economic growth and prosperity, who gets to grow?

"Cities have grown up in areas where there's limited water - if they're to continue to grow, they're going to need water. And rural areas of Texas are now prime targets," says Dr. Ronald Kaiser, professor of water and law policy at Texas A&M University.

"Groundwater is like money in the bank," he says. "The issue is often framed as agriculture vs. urban. But it is rural vs. urban, not just agriculture."

An exploding youth population and spinoff trade from massive growth in Ciudad Jurez's maquiladora industry is set to double El Paso's population of 750,000 over the next 50 years. A key water source will bleed dry in half that time.

El Paso wants to pump up to 50,000 acre-feet of water a year - just less than half its current annual use - from one or more remote "water ranches."

One of them could be the 25,000-acre Antelope Valley Ranch that abuts Mr. Howard's spread.

And regional water-planning officials have included the idea in the water-use plan that they submitted to the state last month.

"We're not talking about totally supplying El Paso - just supplementing it," says Ed Archuleta, general manager of the El Paso Water Utilities Public Service Board.

"I hope they don't see us as a big gorilla out here."

Meanwhile, ranchers in Jeff Davis County have battled droughts in four out of the past five years.

Residents of at least one popular tourist spot have reported dry wells of late, too.

They worry that the water-ranching plan would drain the region's precious aquifers, despite assurances of tests before El Paso draws a drop.

"People think of West Texas as a place with no water, so starting out we have an obstacle to overcome when recruiting business," says Jake Brisbin Jr., who empathizes with both sides in the conflict.

A former Presidio County judge, he's now an El Paso resident and executive director of the Rio Grande Council of Governments, a regional planning authority.

"Because of El Paso's growing economy, they have a huge economic stake," Mr. Brisbin says. "If they're viewed as not having enough water reserves, their economic development will stop.

"On the other hand, you have these communities like Marfa, Alpine and Fort Davis, and they're experiencing a great boom."

Polarizing discussions

Texas Senate Bill 1 in 1997 tossed together these disparate groups when it divided the state into 16 regions and directed each to devise a 50-year water plan.

Polarization set in right from the start with the Far West Texas Water Planning Group, which covers the seven counties stretching from El Paso through the Big Bend.

El Paso members felt the water was theirs to take, and rural members held that it belonged to them.

"There were times when I felt like there was a possibility of violence breaking out," says Mr. Brisbin, recounting incidents of shouting and even threats. "That's what water will do. Out here they say whiskey's for drinking; water's for fighting."

But after 21/2 years, he says, talks ended on a conciliatory note.

Rural forces accepted inclusion of the long-distance pipelining strategy.

El Paso agreed to the studies, which are to measure how the pipeline would affect the aquifer and the area's economy.

The Texas Water Development Board is now assembling the regional reports into a comprehensive statewide policy in 2002.

Even before the regional planning process took effect, El Paso had been eyeing the water beneath this corner of Texas. Ten years ago, the city quietly bought Antelope Valley Ranch, straddling Presidio and Jeff Davis counties near the tiny, stuccoed village of Valentine.

"The driving force was, Number 1, we live in the desert," says Mr. Archuleta, the El Paso water official. Annual rainfall there is just less than 9 inches.

El Paso gets about half of its water from the Rio Grande, and the other half from aquifers. Population and business growth are boosting water demand. Just across the border, a boom continues in Ciudad Jurez, a teeming industrial city of 1.2 million. Both cities draw - and draw heavily - on the Hueco Bolson aquifer.

"If we did nothing," says Mr. Archuleta, "we would lose all the water in the Hueco Bolson in 25 years."

Business leaders say the implications are enormous. One major developer is even paying for the water board's studies on pipeline strategies. The company, Hunt Building Corp., holds about 3,300 acres of undeveloped land in the El Paso area.

"That's a long-term kind of investment," says Hunt vice president John Edmonson. "And we looked at the implications of our water situation and identified it as a very significant potential limiter. When you go out and attract investment, that's usually the first thing that comes up."

On the ranch

Antelope Valley Ranch has emerged as a leading option, Mr. Archuleta says, although it could cost \$250 million to extend a pipeline there

The city owns another 21,000-acre water ranch near Van Horn and is also considering piping water from the Dell Valley in northern Hudspeth County.

El Paso's plans sent tremors three hours away to the Davis Mountains, where people are closer to the land and conversations start with, "Did you get rain last night?"

For one thing, locals say the exact rate at which the water under Antelope Valley is replenished is unknown. It's generally believed to be as low as 5,000 acre-feet a year. El Paso wants to pump a minimum of 15,000-acre feet annually.

"That's 10,000 acre-feet that's not being replaced, which in effect is mining the aquifer," says Albert Miller, who ranches with his brother, Bill, about four miles from Antelope Valley. "A lot of people have shallow wells here, and they'd have to go deeper."

As it is, Jeff Davis County residents have reported that 10 wells have gone dry over the last five or six months, according to local water manager Janet Adams, a member of the regional water planning group. Only half that many wells were reported dry over an entire year, just three years ago, she says.

Two wells gave out last summer at Fort Davis National Historic Site, a restored 1800s cavalry fort and a popular tourist attraction.

Tourism is important here. Marfa and Fort Davis are favorites of visitors traveling north from Big Bend National Park. The cities are being spruced up with downtown refurbishing projects, new inns and restaurants.

At the same time, the southern end of Presidio County is growing from trade with Mexico, which should help propel the population past 10,000 for the first time, says county judge Jerry Agan. The uncertainty over water puts leaders in a quandary.

"Everybody out here is concerned. That's our lifeline," Mr. Agan says. "If we don't have water out here, we might as well move to El Paso."

Brewster County rancher Tom Beard, the chairman of the regional water planning group, preaches the need for consensus between urban and rural interests.

Still, he ultimately doesn't want El Paso to pump more water than can be replenished.

"We think that we need to safeguard the resource," Mr. Beard says. "There's a school of thought that says you treat it like oil, drawing more than the recharge. I think that's an irresponsible thing to do."

Mr. Archuleta, the El Paso water official, rejects the idea that landowners would be hurt by that kind of a pumping plan.

"That's where we disagree," he says.

Passions on both sides clearly won't cool even as state water officials ponder the West Texas plan in relation to other regional proposals and shape the final document due next year.

Both camps watch Austin - against the chance of any new water legislation this year, and for amendments to the water plan as it moves through the bureaucracy.

"We've got to stay on top of this every day," says Ms. Adams, manager of both the Fort Davis Water Supply Corp. and the Jeff Davis County Underground Water Conservation District.

"We can't afford to just say, 'OK, this is a done deal.' Because as long as anybody is interested in water from West Texas, there will be fears." Photos by Michael Mulvey