

Water lease proposal irks many

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ALPINE -- Nearly 500 people from West Texas counties packed the Alpine school district's administration auditorium for a public hearing of the General Land Office's School Land Board on Tuesday, mostly to speak against or question a proposal from a private company to pump water from the desert region and sell it on the market.

The board, which oversees the leasing of state property, is considering a proposal from Rio Nuevo Ltd., a Midland-based partnership of mostly oil and gas business people, to pump water from about 350,000 acres of West Texas land in four counties so it can sell up to 16 billion gallons of groundwater each year. The counties involved are Hudspeth, Culberson, Jeff Davis and Presidio. El Paso and Brewster counties had been but are no longer being considered.

Still, Rio Nuevo could target El Paso as a customer, said Ted Houghton, a board commissioner from El Paso. But he said the plan has "long way to go."

"These men come from oil and gas backgrounds ... ," Houghton said. "They've never done this (sell water) before, and there is a huge difference between the two."

Bill Addington of Sierra Blanca said many West Texans, including his family, oppose exporting water to other parts of the state.

"This is a desert, and now they want to take water from here, which is a scarce resource, and market it to the highest bidder," said Addington, who also represented the El Paso Sierra Club at Tuesday's hearing.

Some of the people, including ranchers with families dating back three to six generations, complained that they had little information and notice about the proposal.

"This is the Chihuahuan Desert. On a map, it's always depicted as brown," Marfa Mayor Oscar Martinez said. "Leave our water alone. We're dry enough."

Several of the Rio Nuevo partners presented some details about their proposal. But many people in the audience said important and timely information about the region's water supply was lacking, and they urged the board to study the plan thoroughly and consult with independent experts.

Robert Cannon, one of the Rio Nuevo partners, said the proposal could generate up to \$7 million a year for the permanent school fund. Roger Abel, another Rio Nuevo partner and former president of Occidental Petroleum, said the groundwater from state-owned land that's idle would be put to good use because it would help Texas schoolchildren and deliver the resource to communities that need it.

Cannon said that besides leasing publicly owned land, the company is looking at acquiring water from 300,000 acres of privately owned land in the region.

Previously, the El Paso Public Service Board bought land near Valentine and other West Texas ranches to ensure El Paso's water supply. Some of the tracts that Rio Nuevo wants to tap are within miles of the PSB lands.

Michael Fahy, El Paso Water Utilities planning and development manager, attended the hearing to learn more about the Rio Nuevo proposal. The utility is governed by the PSB.

General Land Office Commissioner Jerry Patterson said the main issues to be decided before voting on the proposal are how much water is available and how much of it can be removed without harming the region.

Alpine resident Frances K. Sage, who attended the hearing, urged the School Land Board to let a state interim legislative committee review the proposal before taking action.

"I ask you to put a moratorium on this deal and any others you are working on," Sage said.

State Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, is on a Senate committee that plans to review the leasing of state-owned land for water development. The committee is expected to begin having public hearings in January.

During Tuesday's emotionally charged hearing, other critics objected to the commission's considering a proposal that did not pass through a bid process.