

Exporting water tops hearing

Diana Washington Valdez
El Paso Times

Most people attending Tuesday's meeting of the Texas Senate Select Committee on Water were interested in one issue -- a private company's proposal to pump water out of the arid West Texas region and sell it to thirsty cities elsewhere.

Sen. Eliot Shapleigh, D-El Paso, a member of the committee, said he was concerned that a private company might operate as a monopoly and charge unreasonable rates to communities with short water supplies

At the hearing in El Paso, State Land Office Commissioner Jerry Patterson was the first official to testify and answer questions about the Midland-based Rio Nuevo's proposal to mine groundwater from state-owned land in West Texas counties. Ranchers, farmers and water officials have voiced concerns that exporting the water would worsen drought conditions.

"The Number 1 issue is how much water is there, and how much we can afford to export, if any, without hurting the water (supply)," Patterson said.

Two representatives for Rio Nuevo confirmed that they are willing to pay for test wells and other exploration work to determine how much water is available. In exchange, the company would be given the right to first refusal for a water contract.

Patterson said proceeds from state land leased for water mining would go to the Permanent School Fund. Early estimates put the figure at \$7 million from such leases.

However, Patterson said, no contracts will be signed until all questions about the proposed deal are answered. He also sought to dispel what he thinks are erroneous reports regarding the proposal. For example, "we're not selling water to Mexico," he said.

Ed Archuleta, general manager of El Paso Water Utilities, urged the committee to make sure that any proposal follows the state water plan guidelines.

He said importing water is part of El Paso's long-term plan to ensure a water supply to meet future needs. Archuleta described some of the ways El Paso is working to develop its future water resources, including what will be the world's largest desalination plant, and water conservation measures that have reduced overall water usage by El Pasoans.