

Commissioners oppose Hovey water project

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By Andrew Stuart

Staff writer

Brewster County commissioners voted Monday (April 12) to oppose an Odessa group's plan to extract and export groundwater from an area in Brewster and Pecos counties.

"We have another group out there that's engaging in more flim-flam on water," Brewster County Judge Val Beard said.

Commissioners approved Beard's recommendation to "send a similar letter as was sent to Rio Nuevo to express our concern that the group has not consulted with groundwater districts or the Far West Texas Regional Water Planning Group, or secured adequate science" on the groundwater resources in question.

Texas Mountain Canyon Water Association (TMCWA) is eyeing groundwater in a formation known as the Hovey Trough, an underground gravel bed that extends for 30 miles along Hwy. 67, to within 15 miles of Fort Stockton. (See map page A6.)

The company proposes to export the groundwater to cities in the Permian Basin and Concho Valley – areas currently served by the Colorado River Municipal Water District (CRMWD) – and potentially on to Central Texas municipalities within the Lower Colorado River Authority.

But scientific understanding of how large-scale pumping in the Hovey Trough would affect current users, other aquifers and springs is limited.

TMCWA contends that the Hovey Trough collects runoff from rainfall on the Glass, Davis and Barilla Mountains and estimates the amount of recharge at between 44,000 and 110,000 acre-feet a year. The company also suggests that the Hovey Trough is distinct from other major aquifers, and that water from the trough gradually sinks lower into the ground, where it becomes mineral-laden and unfit to drink.

But John Ashworth, a consultant with LBG-Guyton, which has submitted a proposal to TMCWA to study the Hovey Trough, said that the company's contention that the trough is a "source all to itself" and is unconnected to other aquifers in the region needs further study.

The Hovey Trough is adjacent to the Edwards-Trinity Aquifer, a large aquifer that extends from the Trans-Pecos into Central Texas, and the Capitan Reef Aquifer, which extends north into New Mexico.

"There are hardly any aquifers that are all to themselves," Ashworth said. "There needs to be an awful lot more work done to see if waters that infiltrate down stay there, or go down into the

Capitan Reef Aquifer.”

Ashworth also said that it was likely that any large-scale pumping in the Hovey Trough would affect irrigation operations at Belding Farms, southwest of Fort Stockton.

According to a preliminary “water plan” developed by TMCWA, the development of the Hovey Water Project would proceed in stages and involve the formation of several financial entities.

Development would begin with research on the sustainability of the groundwater resources, to be funded by private investors. These investors would lend or invest about \$250,000 in a group called the Hovey Investment Company, and the investors would in turn receive 10 percent of the revenues of the project. The \$250,000 would be used to study the sustainability of the Hovey Trough water supply and to conduct market analysis.

A second entity, called Hovey Management, would manage the project, overseeing the aquifer research and negotiating with landowners and potential customers.

TMCWA itself would lease the water rights from landowners and sell the water, serving as a conduit for revenues from the project.

In addition to ranches owned by TMCWA partners, which include the 11,000-acre Old Hovey Ranch, the 25,000-acre Burnt House Ranch and the 4,500-acre Pfiester Ranch, the company lists a number of other area ranches in its plan.

The list includes the Leoncita Ranch, which is owned and operated by Judge Beard and her husband Tom Beard. Judge Beard said that TMCWA was using the Leoncita name to generate interest in the proposal, and that any suggestion that the Leoncita was involved in the project was untrue.

According to the plan, landowners would receive 50 percent of the revenues from the Hovey Water Project.

The company envisions two possible routes for transporting the groundwater to population centers in other parts of the state. One option calls for a 105-mile pipeline to the Midland-Odessa terminal of the CRMWD pipeline, which currently transports water from the CRMWD’s reservoirs on the Colorado River to the Midland-Odessa area. A second option involves a pipeline following the rail line from Fort Stockton to San Angelo.

Under either option, excess water pumped from the Hovey Trough could be sold to customers in Central Texas, by releasing unused water from Colorado River reservoirs for use downstream.

The company plans for the CRMWD or the municipalities that would purchase the water to fund and operate the pipeline. TMCWA proposes that the political entities could pay for pipeline construction by issuing revenue bonds.

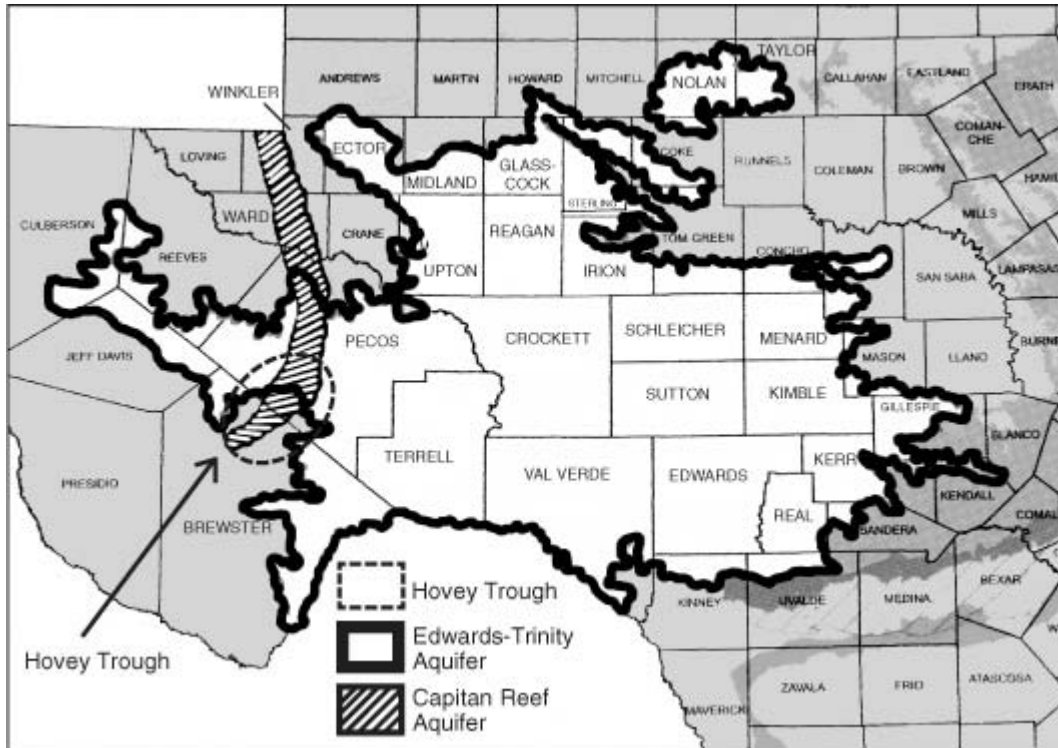
John Grant, general manager of the CRMWD, one of the company’s targeted customers, said the district has not been yet been formally approached about the Hovey project.

“They have never officially approached the district with a proposal or concept,” Grant said. “It’s

hard to evaluate what their proposal is until we see it.”

Grant said that while he questioned the company’s projections on the trough’s recharge rate, the CRMWD would “be willing to look at any sound data that they have.” Grant said that any agreement to purchase water would have to await that data.

“It’s a long way out there,” he said.



Principals in Texas Mountain Canyon Water Association:

James O. Reese of Odessa, a former three-term mayor of Odessa.

Karl V. Painter of Midland, a professional business consultant.

Walter L. Williams, vice chairman and director of Cheniere Energy, Inc.

Mark B. Davis of Dallas, a senior vice president of Magnum Hunter Resources, Inc.

Delmon Hodges of Fort Stockton, a former Pecos County judge.