

Water sustainability right for Big Bend

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The region's groundwater districts have tended thus far toward a philosophy of sustainability for the management of groundwater. Sustainability requires that water production remain in line with the recharge rates of aquifers, minimizing the depletion of the water table. Under current state law, the region's groundwater districts have the power to adopt sustainability as a matter of policy. Doing so would allow them to reject water development proposals that would draw down the region's aquifers.

Policies of sustainability would ensure sufficient groundwater to sustain the fragile desert ecosystems upon which the region's residents and economy depend, and there is widespread agreement among area residents that a sustainability approach is appropriate for Far West Texas. In the absence of sustainable management, springs could be the first victims of large-scale pumping and a falling water table. As vital resources for wildlife, springs and the flora and fauna they sustain are central to the region's hunting and ecotourism economies.

A depleted water table could also force water users to drill deeper wells, an expensive process that would place strain on ranchers already operating in shifting and difficult conditions.

Furthermore, the relationship between ground and surface water in the region is not fully understood. Large-scale pumping could impact flows in the Rio Grande. The Rio Grande, already hard-pressed by upstream diversion and use, is integral to West Texas' farming and tourism economies and should not be subjected to additional strains.

Policies of sustainability would allow certain kinds of water export projects. While landowners are challenging the project in court, El Paso's plans for water development in the Dell Valley might fit into a model of sustainability, as the Bone Springs-Victorio Peak Aquifer there is known to have a high rate of recharge. On the other hand, water projects targeting the Ryan Flat Aquifer, which is not believed to recharge quickly, might be rejected.

Difficult decisions regarding the allocation of water resources among municipal and agricultural interests will persist, but policies of sustainability would facilitate the responsible management of a limited resource -- and help preserve the fabric upon which life in this region depends.

Area residents -- as well as others across the state and the nation -- have an interest in keeping Far West Texas a place of natural beauty, human recreation and rural, agrarian life. Indeed, many believe the region has more value in those regards than simply as a source of water. The region's groundwater districts should stand together in sending that message -- and consider formalizing a philosophy of sustainability in their rules.