

Big Bend Sentinel  
Thursday, April 28, 2005  
Where is your town in the water race?  
By STEPHANIE CORLEY

FAR WEST TEXAS - In the wake of what has been dubbed the coming "water age" by scientists, speculation that water will replace oil as the new liquid gold have city planners scrambling to identify unique needs and resources for their towns. In the Far West Texas region, utility directors are examining water use over the past few years in an attempt to estimate water needs for the future.

In a March 2005 report by the Presidio City Administration, 14 percent of almost 21 million gallons produced monthly was unaccounted for. Presidio City Clerk Elizabeth Bustamante said the largest users are the Presidio stockyards, Three Palms Inn and Presidio ISD. Bustamante said that Presidio's water use is increasing.

"We're using more because the climate is changing, it's getting hotter and people are using it to irrigate," Bustamante asserts. "We've had a big increase in the number of accounts. In summer, there is a drop (in the number of accounts) because so many people work out of town and turn off their water when they leave."

Bustamante said she is optimistic that Presidio's water supply will be sufficient even with a projected population surge. "Our quality reports say we should be fine for the next 20 years."

Marfa Public Works Director Robert Silva said that water use has been declining and that the water supply has been increasing, an unusual case in the tri-county area. Silva reports that in 2000, Marfa accounts used 254,351,000 gallons of water. By 2004, the number of gallons used fell to 183,501,000 as part of a trend in Marfa of larger users switching from city water to private water wells.

"On average in Marfa in 2004, we used 503,000 gallons per day or 15,292,000 per month," Silva said. "We have no water loss at all." Other factors in Marfa's lighter usage, according to Silva, include more annual rainfall over the last couple of years and the increasing number of part-time residents who have purchased property, creating a number of accounts that are dormant for much of the year.

"A lot of people have homes here who don't actually live here," he said. "They come and go."

Although Marfa ISD and businesses are large users, Silva said the majority of high users are private homes.

"Businesses used quite a bit, but the majority of high users are private residences with big lawns," explained Silva.

The Marfa Municipal Golf Course, which is on a private well, uses an average of 50 million gallons per year. Village Farms tomato growers has two 40-acre greenhouses in Marfa and one in Fort Davis. Village Farms Vice President Mike Bledsoe said each greenhouse uses an average of 80 million gallons per year from private metered wells that are monitored by county underground water districts.

Fort Davis Utility Director Janet Adams said water usage has been declining slightly.

Total Fort Davis use in 2000 was 81 million gallons, reported Adams, and had fallen to 63 million gallons by 2004.

"It has to do with the rainfall," she said. "People are not watering (lawns) as much."

The Fort Davis water supply system experiences less than five percent water loss, which Adams explained "goes mainly for fire department use and a small amounts for leaks and line flushing."

High users in Fort Davis are mostly private residences, according to Adams, but the single largest user is Fort Davis ISD.

Adams said that usage for the Powell Plant Farm had decreased considerably, from 27 million gallons in 2002 to 1.8 million in 2004, because the plant changed from being open six months of the year to being open for only three. Village Farms' Fort Davis tomato plant's water usage has been consistent over the last two years, said Adams, using 97 million in 2003 and 99 million in 2004. Both Village Farms and Powell are billed by the Jeff Davis Underground Water District, a county wide billing and metering entity "All the cities in the Jeff Davis district went down in 2004," said Adams.

"I think we have an ample supply here and with growth we will be fine. We planned for the future pretty well."

Alpine City Manager Karen Philippi said that the city is addressing a long-time problem of unaccounted water loss averaging 20 to 40 percent of water pumped. From October 2003 through September 2004, total water pumped from Alpine wells was more than 468 million gallons, and total gallons billed were almost 340 million; meaning 112 million gallons were unaccounted for.

"We're changing our procedure for tracking gallons pumped and sold," Philippi explained. "There's a lot of legitimate use that's not tracked - the fire department, flushing lines, dewatering lines for extensions, it's not sold water but it is legitimate."

Philippi said that leaks in lines, unofficial connections to city water and standing agreements the city has with several ranches allowing the city the use of land in exchange for free water also accounted for some of the loss.

"Large amounts of the unbilled water are because of contractual obligations of the city in years gone by," she said, "they have agreements in effect that in exchange for easements they were granted so much water."

According to Philippi, the ranches who have agreements with the city receive about 200,000 gallons per month free.

Water consumption in Alpine has remained consistent over the last few years staying within 400 to 460 million gallons per year. Philippi said that the largest user is Sul Ross State University.

"Of the top 20, Sul Ross uses more than the other 19. They use 58.9 million gallons of water per year" she explained.

According to Philippi, the second largest user is Alpine ISD, with 6.7 million gallons per year and the Big Bend Regional Hospital District with 5.7 million per year. "It goes down from there to apartment buildings, hotels and motels" she said.

The Alpine golf course, said Philippi, is on a separate well that is a city well but is not a part of the regular system