

Far West Texas water group completes draft

The Desert-Mountain Times

Publish Date: June 2, 2005

By Andrew Stuart

Staff writer

The recurring tug-of-war between El Paso and rural Far West Texas interests over the region's water resources reached a détente last week, in a fashion that seemed to satisfy all parties – and particularly those in the Tri-county area.

According to a draft document approved by the Far West Texas Water Planning Group on Thursday (May 26), El Paso will not import groundwater from property it owns in Jeff Davis County before 2060.

The news was welcomed by local water planners, who were concerned about how pumping from El Paso's Antelope Valley water ranch, near the Jeff Davis/Presidio County line, could impact hundreds of shallow domestic and livestock wells near the property, as well as the springs that depend on the West Texas Bolsons which underlie Antelope Valley.

"I'm pleased with this," said Albert Miller, a planning group member and chair of the Jeff Davis County Groundwater Conservation District. "I think it shows a recognition that we should use something that's renewable. The best evidence is that pumping out of the West Texas Bolsons is not renewable. Of course, when we revisit the plan in five years, everything may be different."

The planning group is charged with updating a 50-year plan for managing the region's water every five years. This plan, the second developed by the group, was the first to tackle the complex issue of how the rapidly growing City and County of El Paso will meet long-term water needs.

Based on projections, El Paso will be unable to meet its water demand using local sources beginning in 2010, and water specialists there had considered importing water from Antelope Valley.

Under the plan adopted Thursday, El Paso will not import water from Antelope Valley in the next 50 years, but will meet its water needs by relying more heavily on Rio Grande water and by importing groundwater from the Dell Valley area and from an El Paso-owned property on the Culberson/Hudspeth County line north of Van Horn.

The water plan also includes language that for the first time identifies a minimum level of

flow necessary in the Big Bend-stretch of the Rio Grande to sustain agricultural and recreational use of the river, as well as the native plants and animals that live there.

The plan identifies a flow of 250 cubic feet per second in the Rio Grande below Presidio as the minimum necessary flow. The figure is an ambitious one, given that flows along the stretch of river regularly linger closer to 100 cubic feet per second.

“Two hundred and fifty cubic feet per second is enough where you can float a raft down Santa Elena Canyon,” said Mike Davidson, a planning group member who developed the new language on river flows. “It’s enough flow where native aquatic species can do well. If you stay under 250 cfs for extended periods, agricultural, recreational and ecological elements all suffer.”

The water planning group submitted its draft plan to the Texas Water Development Board this week. The Water Development Board will review the plan and recommend changes, and the planning group will meet again to consider those recommendations.

A public hearing on the plan is tentatively schedule for 1 p.m. July 21 in Alpine on the Sul Ross State University campus.