

Rio Nuevo not in main body of regional water plan

By STERRY BUTCHER
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ALPINE - Rio Nuevo's proposal to sell water from beneath state land won't appear in the main body of the regional water plan.

Members of the Far West Texas Water Planning Group were in Alpine last Thursday to discuss last-minute changes and amendments to the 50-year water management plan, which the group significantly revises every five years.

This version of the plan, called the initially prepared plan, is due to be turned in to the Texas Water Development Board by January 5. Water planners had discussed how to handle Rio Nuevo's proposal and whether it merited inclusion in the document in earlier meetings, but planning group Chair Tom Beard wanted some further clarification from the group last week.

"The fact is, we didn't get more information and the fundamentals didn't change," Beard told the group.

At issue was the level of detail in Rio Nuevo's proposal. Although representatives from Rio Nuevo made a presentation about their project to water planners last February, the information they presented was scanty and not specific enough to warrant consideration as an actual water use strategy. At a meeting this summer, water planners decided to mention in the body of the text that there existed proposals that were not sufficiently developed to include in the plan; a letter from Beard asking for more information and a letter from Rio Nuevo stating that no more specific information was available would both be included in an appendix.

"That gives them a dignity to which they are not entitled," said Beard.

Janet Adams is a water planning group member and the general manager of the Presidio and Jeff Davis county underground water conservation districts. She had seen a copy of a recent and somewhat more explicit business plan produced by Rio Nuevo. Of the 16 folks associated with the planning group who were sitting at the table, she alone appeared to have seen this document.

"I assumed everyone got it," she said, looking around the table in surprise.

"There still is no end user. They still haven't said how much water they want. The information we need is still not there."

The amount of press that the proposal has received since it was first made publicly known two years ago begs some kind of notation in the plan or appendix, said group member Teresa Todd.

"There's a difference between a strategy and a concept," said Bill Hutchison, an alternate from the El Paso Water Utility who was filling in for planning group member Ed Archuleta. "Rio Nuevo is not going to be the last crazy idea we deal with. This is an opportunity to make that distinction between the concepts that are out there that haven't risen to the level of a strategy. It would set a precedent for what constitutes a reasonable proposal."

The water planners agreed to make no mention of Rio Nuevo in the main plan.

It had already been decided to put all public comment about the initially prepared plan in a separately bound document that would accompany the main plan. Water planners opted to include the correspondence to and from Rio Nuevo in this document.

In other revisions, water planning group members suggested minor changes, corrections and updates to information about municipal suppliers, evaluation criteria applied to different strategies and the environmental impact of each proposed strategy. They looked over a new table that projects irrigation and livestock demand in Presidio and Jeff Davis counties and approved the administrative budget for the production of the plan, which is facilitated by the Rio Grande Council of Governments.

The group unanimously adopted the initially prepared plan at last week's meeting and, barring any serious issues that come up with any of the proposed changes or revisions that will be integrated into the document, the plan will be finalized by the group's consultants and turned into the water development board by the January 5 deadline.