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## **Protesters decry proposed deal to sell millions of gallons of Oklahoma water to parched Texas**

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A plan struck behind closed doors to sell millions of gallons of southeastern Oklahoma water to drought-stricken Texas was met with angry resistance from protesters carrying signs reading "Don't drain on us."

"The thirsty people are here in this state," Margaret Ruff, director of the Oklahoma Wildlife Federation, said shortly after the deal was made public at the annual Gov.'s Water Conference on Wednesday.

"We object to giving away water that belongs to the people of this state," Ruff said.

The state of Oklahoma and the Chickasaw and Choctaw American Indian tribes drew up the water compact in closed-door negotiations. The deal is subject to approval by the state Legislature, the tribes' governing bodies and the secretary of the U.S. Interior Department.

Protesters chanted "Oklahoma water is for Oklahoma people" during a protest outside the Myriad Convention Center, where the conference was held.

State and tribal officials defended the deal, saying that sales of surplus water make good economic sense and that such deals could be stopped during a drought.

"Neither the state nor the tribes are giving away anything," said Duane Smith, executive director the Oklahoma Water Resources Board.

The compact would sell up to 160 million gallons of surface water along six river basins in southeastern Oklahoma; revenues would be split by the state and tribes. West Texas is now in a drought.

"The water we're selling is excess water," said Greg Pyle, chief of the Choctaw Nation. He said the tribes would use money from water sales to improve tribal health and education programs.

The state would reinvest the money to spur economic development in the 22 affected counties, state officials said.

"This water compact is based on the absolute principle that our first priority will be the citizens of southeast Oklahoma, and then the citizens of Oklahoma at large," Gov. Frank Keating said.

In McAlester, the Pittsburg County Commissioners passed a resolution opposing the compact. The resolution said the compact was negotiated in private and that citizens "may be negatively affected from such a sale."

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On the Net:

Oklahoma Water Resources Board: <http://www.state.ok.us/~owrb>

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