

Water authority, landowners may settle water dispute

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PLAINVIEW, Texas - A West Texas water authority and a group of Panhandle landowners led by oil tycoon T. Boone Pickens are trying to settle their dispute over water rights in Roberts County.

Directors of the Canadian River Municipal Water Authority talked Wednesday about a proposal to settle their protest of a plan by the landowners to draw water from the Ogallala Aquifer, general manager Kent Satterwhite said.

In June, the water authority filed a protest with the Panhandle Groundwater Conservation District to stop the landowners group, known as Mesa Inc., from obtaining permits to pump the water and ship it downstate. "We've told them what we need to stop our protest," Satterwhite said. "We've started the process. I think there is a chance we may reach a settlement."

The water authority claimed in its protest that Mesa had not provided enough information in its permit application about its planned well field, and that the proposed operation could infringe on the water authority's ability to serve its 11 member cities in the Panhandle and South Plains. The process toward a possible settlement began when the Panhandle Groundwater Conservation District general manager C.E. Williams called the parties together in December in an effort to avoid costly litigation. Both sides agreed to have a Mesa hydrologist work up plans for Mesa's well field and submit it to the water authority, Mesa attorney Mike Powell said.

"Mesa would much rather expedite the process, however that may be done," Powell said. "And litigation is not normally a quick process. We want our permits."

The meeting, which did not include discussions about a lawsuit filed by Mesa against the water authority in August, indicated that Mesa still has "some gripes and complaints with CRMWA, and I'm sure they do with us also," said Mike Boswell, another Mesa attorney. "But it's gotten to the point that everyone would like it to go away."

Should a settlement be reached about the protest case, Boswell said Mesa would be willing to open discussions about the lawsuit, which claimed the entity's new wells will infringe on the group's property rights.

In early December, Mesa and CRWMA each argued for summary judgment before a Roberts County district judge. The judge has not issued a ruling.

An administrative hearing on the protest issue that was scheduled to begin Jan. 28 at the PGCD offices in White Deer has been rescheduled for April 8, Williams said.

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