

200 hear water plan from SAWS

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GONZALES — About 200 people turned out in the county's largest courtroom Tuesday to witness the first stage of what many here see as a big-city raid on rural water supplies.

San Antonio Water System officials say their studies have identified extra water here, and they're planning a \$228 million project that would take 22,500 acre-feet (7.33 billion gallons) from western Gonzales County and another 11,000 acre-feet from western Wilson County as early as 2009.

Officials with the Gonzales County Groundwater Conservation District contend their groundwater availability models show the water's not there and that SAWS attempts to take it doesn't jibe with their management plan or their rules.

But SAWS has spent \$23 million so far on studies, design, water leases and pipeline rights of way and has budgeted to spend lots more next year.

A groundswell of opposition to the project has been building, and people got to express it Tuesday at the first hearing for SAWS' permits to drill wells and export water.

"I urge the board to deny the permits," said County Judge Marvin Quinney of neighboring Wilson County, where the pipeline would cross. "It's important to us as well as to you that we maintain our independence as far as our water out here."

Diane Savage, with the Wilson County Water Action Project, also urged the board to reject the permits. "We do not want to watch our rural areas suffer because all available water for agriculture and development is being sent off to San Antonio," she said to loud applause.

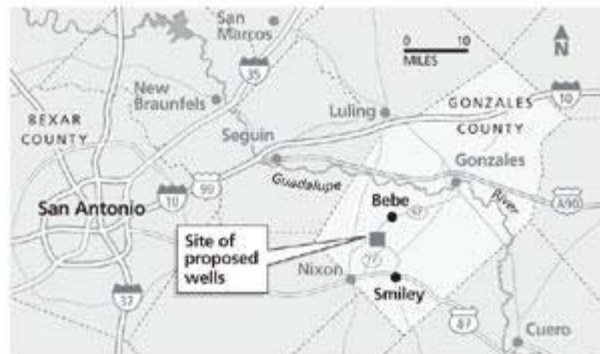
Les Talley presented a petition that he said contained signatures of 1,031 people asking the board to stop approving any exports of water and to cut in half the 100-foot aquifer drawdown the rules now allow.

Not everyone was opposed to the permits.

"I think that \$62.50 an acre-foot will go a long way for Gonzales County," said W.R. Low, a ranch owner who said he's thinking about leasing his water rights at that rate to SAWS.

Tapping the Carrizo

The San Antonio Water System wants to drill 14 wells into land it's leased in Gonzales County to start a project to bring Carrizo Aquifer groundwater to the Alamo City. Many in the rural county oppose the \$228 million project. They fear it would leave them without water for future needs.



Source: San Antonio Water System

EXPRESS-NEWS GRAPHIC

"Landowners can improve their land, run more cattle and bring more money into the county," Low said to scattered applause from the crowd.

SAWS is asking to drill 14 wells and export 11,688 acre-feet (3.8 billion gallons) of water each year from the Carrizo Aquifer as a first step.

The board voted to hire Austin water and environmental attorney John Vay to serve as hearings examiner and to assess the cost to SAWS.

Vay immediately convened a hearing to determine who has standing to participate as parties in the hearings, which will soon proceed to an evidentiary phase. Vay is to gather facts and to make findings and recommendations to the board, which has the final say.

Among those accepted as parties were entities that have existing or proposed municipal supply projects nearby: the city of Nixon, the Schertz-Seguin Local Government Corp., the Gonzales County Water Supply Corp., Bexar Metropolitan Water District, and the Water Protection Association, a group of landowners with wells that could be affected, including the city of Smiley.

SAWS Water Resources Director Calvin Finch told the hearing that the system's models show the water is there and that SAWS will make sure that well owners are protected and that future needs in the county are met.

"Gonzales County will benefit to the tune of about \$1 million a year in leasing fees and water export fees," Finch said.

In addition, SAWS has been trying to buy the support of Nixon and Smiley, offering to let them split \$100,000 a year until the project starts pumping, then to split \$20 an acre-foot a year after that.

"We've been negotiating with them for six to eight months," Finch said before the meeting. "What we hoped was that we'd reassure them about the project and that they would see that they would benefit greatly in terms of their future water supplies and their ability to grow."

"It's very important," Finch said of the Gonzales project to SAWS water resource picture.