

Who's minding the water?

Water district needed, some say

By Kevin Welch

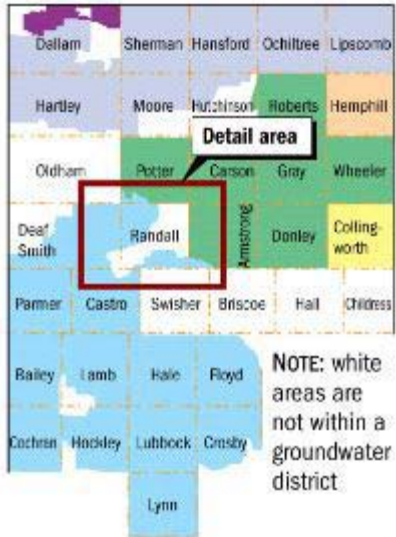
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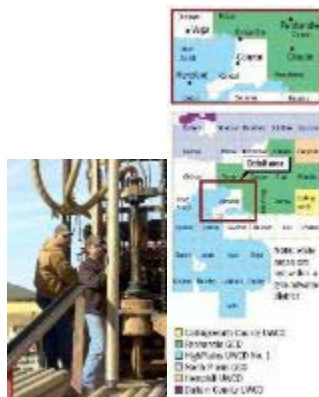


Michael Schumacher / Amarillo Globe-News

Bruce Currie, left, and Brandon Nease, with Currie Drilling Company of Canyon, drill a new water well Monday southwest of Amarillo.



- Collingsworth County UWCD
- Panhandle GCD
- HighPlains UWCD No. 1
- North Plains GCD
- Hemphill UWCD
- Dallam County UWCD



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 The drilling rigs got their attention.

When landowners on South Washington Street outside the city limits saw several water wells going in near them, the rumors flew.

And while it turned out there were no plans to export the water, concerns linger.

"I don't want to limit anybody's water," said Kim Campbell, one of the landowners in the area. "But I don't want somebody putting in 10 wells and nobody's monitoring them."

A swath through the middle of Randall County, from the southwest corner to the northeast corner, is not in an underground water conservation district, including the area where the new wells went in.

That means anyone owning water rights can pump as much water as they want, no matter the impact on their neighbors.

"If they start developing that area and putting in houses and everybody has their own wells, somebody needs to be watching," Campbell said. "It will affect everybody."

The state is a patchwork of districts, but large areas are not protected.

"There are 89 water districts and eight or nine to be confirmed," said Kelly Mills, a geologist with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. "They cover about half the counties in Texas."

"It almost has to be a crisis or perceived crisis for people to move on getting into a district," said C.E. Williams, general manager of Panhandle Groundwater.

"The more competing interests there are, the more awareness, the more realization there is of the limited supply."

The most active sector in the well drilling business right now is rural housing development, said Bruce Currie, a partner in Currie Drilling in Canyon.

"The homeowners don't usually know if they're in a water district or not," he said.

Working in Randall and neighboring counties, Currie operates under the more restrictive district rules or under the state's broader rules.

"I understand all that. They're trying to protect the water for our youngsters and our youngsters' youngsters," he said.

The majority of the Panhandle is in one of five districts.

The largest are the North Plains Groundwater Conservation District, the Panhandle Groundwater Conservation District and the High Plains Underground Water Conservation District.

The job of the districts is to monitor water supplies and put in place measures to conserve water.

They work with irrigators to make watering crops more efficient.

On top of that, North Plains has a research farm near Etter that it operates in conjunction with Texas A&M University, said Steve Walthour, general manager of the district.

The districts require permits for most wells, although the standards vary.

Panhandle Groundwater also mandates pumpers take no more than one acre foot of water (325,900 gallons) each year for each acre of water rights owned, while North Plains limits pumping to two acre feet in one year or six acre feet over three years.

High Plains does not limit pumping, but Conkwright said he supports a standard that limits the decline of the Ogallala Aquifer to 1.5 percent per year.

The spacing of wells is also limited by all the districts, but the distance varies by district and by the size of the well.

There has been some talk about putting the rest of Randall County into a district.

"Recently we've had people mention it," said Jim Conkwright, general manager of the High Plains district. "They were concerned about water wells being drilled. But as far as I know, there's nothing organized. I think people are concerned with all the growth."

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