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State will continue to review water-pumping plan

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With a major legal challenge removed last week by the state Supreme Court, the state engineer's office can continue its review of an application by a private venture to pump drinking water from Augustin Plains Ranch to determine if it meets state water codes.

The agency would then schedule a public hearing on the matter if it determines it has met codes.

"We look forward to an extensive and thorough hearing that will demonstrate the tremendous value of the project," company spokeswoman Whitney Waite said.

The commercial venture's previous application was rejected by the agency two years ago. It was one of the most contested filings in the history of the state engineer's office, and critics have continued to raise concerns about the latest application.

The ranchers, Ray and Carol Pittman, argued before the Supreme Court that the application seeks to appropriate billions of gallons of water a year but fails to indicate how or where the water will be used.

Their attorney, Bruce Frederick of the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, accused Augustin Plains Ranch of trying to position itself to speculate in future water markets and ultimately sell to the highest bidders.

In court filings, the state engineer's office acknowledged the latest application describes places and purposes for the water that were not included in the first application.

The plan calls for drilling more than three dozen wells capable of pumping more than 17 billion gallons of water a year to supplement dwindling supplies in the Rio Grande Valley.

The company would build a 140-mile pipeline to Bernalillo County as well as other infrastructure to capture runoff for recharging the aquifer beneath the San Augustin Plains west of Socorro.

The Pittmans and other residents in the San Augustin Plains area are concerned the pumping would eventually suck the aquifer dry.