

Company tries again to tap New Mexico plains for water

By Susan Montoya Bryan

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ALBUQUERQUE — A commercial venture that sought to pipe billions of gallons of water from rural Western New Mexico to more populated areas of the drought-stricken state is making another run at getting approval for the \$600 million project.

Augustin Plains Ranch filed a new application Monday with the State Engineer's Office. Its previous application, one of the most contested filings in the agency's history, was rejected two years ago.

After months of meeting with municipalities, regulators and state lawmakers, project director Michel Jichlinski said Augustin Plains Ranch now has a more specific plan that would address the state's water needs.

"All of our elected officials are pressing for answers and we believe APR is one of the state's best options," Jichlinski said in a statement Tuesday.

The plan calls for drilling more than three dozen wells that would be capable of pumping more than 17 billion gallons of water a year for up to three centuries 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.

Ranchers and others in the area are concerned the pumping would eventually suck the aquifer dry.

The state engineer turned down the company's previous application in April 2012, saying the effects could not be reasonably evaluated because the proposal was vague and too broad. A few months later, a state district judge ruled the state engineer was justified in denying the application.

Rural residents and one of the state's largest irrigation districts have criticized Augustin Plains Ranch, saying the company's effort is nothing more than a modern-day water grab. They say Western water doctrine that has been in place for more than a century is supposed to keep speculators from profiting off the sale of water to thirsty users.

While the company has included a letter of support from the city of Rio Rancho, critics say the proposal identifies only potential places and uses for the water. Water law and the New Mexico Constitution require proof of where the water is going and why and that no other water-rights holders be harmed before any transfers are approved.

"The ranch is simply trying to lay claim to a tremendous amount of water, which belongs to the public, before it has any need for that water," said Bruce Frederick, an attorney with the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, which has been fighting the effort to pump in the San Augustin Plains for years.

With little winter snowpack and sporadic summer rains, demand on water resources has intensified as New Mexico marks its fourth year of severe drought. Runoff and river flows have been dismal.

Augustin Plains Ranch contends capturing runoff and recharging the aquifer would boost the sustainability of the area's resources. However, the company said more research is needed to determine exactly how much runoff could be used for replenishing the aquifer.