

NM agency seeks more details on water proposal

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December 2, 2014

SANTA FE — A revamped application by a commercial venture to pipe billions of gallons of drinking water from rural western New Mexico to more populated areas of the drought-stricken state lacks key information, state officials said Tuesday.

The state engineer's office has given Augustin Plains Ranch until the end of the year to provide more specifics on what type of water rights would be developed, how the water would be used and what municipalities or industries would benefit.

Greg Ridgley, general counsel for the office, announced the latest development during an interim legislative meeting. He told state lawmakers applications to develop new water rights must be complete before the state engineer can accept them.

The agency, he said, needs to have enough information to determine if there's sufficient water in the area that has yet to be appropriated and whether assigning new water rights would affect existing rights.

The company's plan calls for drilling more than three dozen wells capable of pumping more than 17 billion gallons of groundwater 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.

Some lawmakers said a decision should not be taken lightly given the volume of water at stake. Others described the proposal as too speculative.

Sen. Peter Wirth, D-Santa Fe, questioned whether capturing storm runoff and recharging the aquifer would be enough to avoid damaging existing rights and the local economy.

"It just seems like these are impossible goals to have on one side and make this work," Wirth said.

Augustin Plains' first application was rejected two years ago after the state engineer determined the proposal was vague and its effects could not be reasonably evaluated. It was one of the most contested filings in the history of the state engineer's office.

The company submitted its latest application in July. After months of review, the office made the request for additional information in a Nov. 25 letter.

The company is reviewing the request.

Project Manager Michael Jichlinski said the application is the first step, and the company envisions spending millions of dollars more on studies to better understand the region's hydrology if the state engineer allows for a hearing.

The company is proposing to develop water, a job Jichlinski said has historically been done by government.

"Our belief is the public sector is tapped out when it comes to the money available for infrastructure development, for all the studies that need to be done. It's simply not there," he said.

While skeptical of the Augustin Plains proposal, Sen. Joe Cervantes, D-Las Cruces, said the West was built on the ability to pipe water from one place to another, and government should be open to the private sector stepping in.