

# Catron County confluence

## Water unites ranchers and environmentalists in a conservative corner of New Mexico – Arla shepherd Nov 25, 2009

<http://www.hcn.org/issues/41.20/catron-county-confluence>

In southwestern New Mexico's Catron County, you're more likely to hear the word "*en-varmint-alist*" than "environmentalist," says Mary Katherine Ray.

A retired schoolteacher and scrimshaw artist in neighboring Socorro County, Ray is the wildlife chair for the Rio Grande chapter of the Sierra Club. She keeps a low profile: "I don't put bumper stickers on my car, I don't wear T-shirts that might be inflammatory, and sometimes I won't say my opinion and just listen."

Many of Catron County's 3,405 residents are wary of "outsiders" like Ray, who moved to the area from El Paso in 1990, part of an ongoing wave of newcomers from urban areas. Locals especially resent outsiders with opinions about what folks should and shouldn't do on their land. The county and its ranchers are notorious for vehemently opposing federal interference, most notably the effort to reintroduce Mexican gray wolves to the area. In the 1990s, the county passed a slew of resolutions designed to challenge federal authority; one land-use plan declared federal agents "a clear and present danger."

Property rights reign supreme in Catron County, says former County Commissioner John Hand Sr., and environmentalists and the government are seen as threats to those rights. That's why it's a bit surprising when everyone -- ranchers, environmentalists and the federal and state governments -- agrees on one thing: water.

In October 2007, Augustin Plains Ranch, LLC, property of Italian recluse Bruno Modena, applied at the State Engineer's Office for rights to pump 54,000 acre-feet (about 17.6 billion gallons) of water per year from underneath land it owns in the northeast part of the San Agustin (sometimes spelled San Augustin) Plains -- a 1,100-square-mile expanse of hills and grasslands in Catron and Socorro counties. The plan called for 37 wells, each 2,000 feet deep, to tap the aquifer beneath the plains.

The proposal sparked more than 400 protest letters. And when the company amended its plan in 2008 -- opting to drill 3,000 feet down instead -- nearly 600 more letters were sent, mostly from local property owners and environmentalists, inundating the office and delaying an administrative hearing.

A couple of weeks after the original proposal opened for public comment, community members ranging from conservative old-timers to liberal newcomers formed an opposition nonprofit that could almost be mistaken for an environmental group: The San Augustin Water Coalition. It's now about 500 members strong, says co-founder Carol Pittman, a left-leaning retiree from San Diego who moved to Catron County in 1995 with her husband. Getting people to work together hasn't been easy, she says, but interests are merging.

Little is understood about how other water systems in the area -- the Gila Watershed, for example -- might be affected by drawing so much water from the San Agustin Basin. The lack of an up-to-date hydrological study worries local ranchers, who fear the proposal would dry up their wells, exterminating a way of life they already see as threatened by government interference and a faltering agricultural economy, sell-offs and subdivisions. If the water coalition decides to seek grant funding, it hopes to pursue its own hydrological study.

Few local landowners drill deeper than 500 feet, and Modena's wells could potentially draw the water table down beyond their reach, says Bruce Frederick, a lawyer with the New Mexico Environmental Law Center, which represents nearly 70 individuals and groups fighting the proposal.

"Everybody thinks if they pump that much water, we won't have anything left," says Roy Farr, vice chairman of the water coalition. Farr's family has ranched here since 1904, but he says that if the proposal succeeds, "Catron County is going to have to get up and leave."

The U.S. Forest Service, along with the Interior Department and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, oppose the plan because of its potential impacts on ecosystems and senior surface water rights and because no large-scale groundwater study has been conducted.

It's unclear what Augustin Plains Ranch plans to do with the water; the company did not return repeated calls to its lawyers and PR firm. According to a 2007 statement, it wants to meet the growing water demands of the Middle Rio Grande Valley. New Mexico itself might need that water in the future to fulfill its contract obligations to Colorado and Texas, says Craig Roepke, deputy director of the New Mexico Interstate Stream Commission, one of the original protesters. Right now, however, the state has no water debt, he says. And since water speculation is illegal in New Mexico, the proposal's legality is questionable, adds Frederick.

Whatever its fate, the proposal has brought Ray, also a member of the coalition, together with people she never thought she'd agree with. At some point, she hopes, residents will start to see each other as people, not enemies. "If we can do both of those things -- defeat the water proposal and learn to work together -- then we would be a better community for it."

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