

Engineer wants to limit water

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Domestic well users may find themselves working with new restrictions some day soon. Falling behind in the state's obligations to Texas under the Pecos River Compact has so worried the Legislature, they may place new limits on domestic wells.

State Engineer Tom Turney, whose office issues domestic-well permits that allow landowners to pump water for domestic or livestock purposes, said he doesn't believe the new restrictions will affect Lea County.

"Lea County is not one of our problem areas," Turney said.

He also added that problem areas are largely in more urban areas — especially large subdivisions along the Pecos and Rio Grand rivers.

"Rural areas, they just hardly make any impact at all," Turney said.

He also emphasized that the legislation would not affect watering of livestock.

"We're not talking about any of these livestock wells," Turney said. "I'm only talking about these wells that are being used for domestic homes."

Turney said the proposed legislation grew out of a request from the Legislature to study the impact of wells on streams. Out of that report, the Legislature's Interim Committee on Water and Natural Resources drafted a bill on domestic wells. So far, the bill is in a very preliminary version and only a "discussion draft" has been prepared.

"There's no specific sponsor in terms of when the legisla-

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ture convenes, then somebody would sponsor specific language," said Ernest Coriz, spokesman for the State Engineer's Office.

The amended version of NMSA 72-12-1 would largely affect areas of the state where no unappropriated water remains and where water use may affect the state's obligations under an interstate compact "or affect existing uses of a mined underground water basin."

The proposed legislation would allow the state engineer to deny a permit for a new domestic well, issue a permit with a limit on the amount of water a person could use, or require the water user to install a meter and file annual

records of water use.

Local leaders not only agree that the new restrictions, if approved, would have little impact on Lea County — they welcome them as way of addressing the state and the county's looming water crisis.

"Anything they can do to develop some sort of criteria for providing those well permits will be very good," said Lea County Manager Dennis Holmberg. "It's not as much of an issue here. We really have no areas with intense housing development."

Holmberg also said addressing water use in other parts of the state "can help us."

For the state, however, the ultimate reason for the proposed legislation is meeting

their delivery obligations to downstream states.

"There's no longer any free water available, so I will have to take the water from somebody if we don't meet our interstate obligations," Turney said.

The legislation is expected to cover much of the state, including areas along the Rio Grande and Pecos rivers. In an average year, New Mexico must release about 700,000 acre-feet from Elephant Butte Reservoir down the Rio Grande.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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