

Water district discusses West Desert test wells, processes with BLM

Wednesday, June 17, 2015

by Ashley Langston, Reporter
Iron County Today

IRON COUNTY – While the Central Iron County Water Conservancy District is still involved in litigation regarding the 21,525 acre-feet of water rights the state engineer approved in 2014, it is moving forward with federal processes to drill more test wells in Pine Valley.

The valley is northwest of Cedar City next to Wah Wah Valley, and the district was awarded 15,000 acre-feet of water there. While Beaver County is contesting the water right approval, the attorney for the CICWCD believes precedent is in their favor and the district is moving forward to get approval from the Bureau of Land Management to drill test wells.

Representatives from the BLM Cedar City Field Office attended a special meeting of the CICWCD on June 4, and discussed the environmental processes required for the test wells and the project as a whole, as well as potential issues that would need to be mitigated.

They said the biggest concern will probably be sage grouse, although they will also have to look at Utah Prairie Dogs, mule deer and pronghorn habitat, and cultural considerations (meaning an archeologist will need to examine the area).

A National Environmental Policy Act document will need to be prepared before test wells can be drilled, and if cultural and biological surveys are done beforehand, the process could take as few as three months, one of the BLM representatives said.

CICWCD Executive Director Paul Monroe said they are realistically anticipating drilling the test wells in summer 2016, between the NEPA process, winter weather, and possible sage grouse issues.

The BLM representatives said if any of the proposed drilling sites are near sage grouse “leks,” that could hold up the process, at least during February, March and April. They said the protected birds breed in locations called leks, and then the females lay their eggs around that location for about four miles and they cannot be disturbed.

Monroe said the district has data indicating high volumes of good water toward the north end of Pine Valley, but geologists feel they will find good water toward the south end of the valley as well and that would decrease piping costs, so they need to drill test wells to confirm. If they find what they anticipate, they will just drill bigger wells next to the test wells in the future, and the test wells will become monitoring wells.

A BLM representative at the meeting said the agency has certain resources it has to consider, and examine how the district's actions will affect those resources. It has to identify those impacts to make the public aware and determine what stipulations will be put into place.

"There shouldn't really be a lot of big surprises," she added.

Those present on behalf of the BLM included Elizabeth Burghard, Cedar City Field Office manager; Gina Ginouves, BLM planning and NEPA specialist; Michelle Campeau, BLM realty specialist; and Brooklynn Shotwell, a BLM land law examiner intern.

Monroe said he felt the BLM representatives were very supportive and they are a great agency to work with. Those in the Cedar City Field Office have a "can-do attitude," he added.

While the primary focus is on the West Desert, the district is also continuing work on other projects, including the aquifer recharge project that would capture excess spring runoff or rainwater and filter it into the aquifer instead of allowing it to evaporate in Quichapa Lake and Rush Lake.

CICWCD Board Chair Brent Hunter said in the meeting that so much rain had fallen in recent weeks, and it was really a shame that so much of it was not able to be used or put into the aquifer. He said he believes that some years that project would save the valley 10,000 to 20,000 acre feet of water.

"That's by far the cheapest way to save water is that Coal Creek recharge," he said.

Monroe said the district is still working with the Utah National Guard and getting the proper permits from the state to make the project happen. It is anticipated in summer 2017.