

Water controversy: Who owns it and who wants it

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ADA - Although Ada has enjoyed clean, fresh water for decades, communities northwest of Ada haven't been so fortunate.

Seven of those communities are trying to change their situation and have formed the Central Oklahoma Water Resource Authority, which has an agreement with an Oklahoma City company called PESA LLC to build a \$200 million, 88-mile pipeline from the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer near Ada to Canadian County to provide for their future water needs.

Gary Jackson, managing partner of PESA, has said his company has agreements with five area ranchers to sell their water to the west metro area.

Communities belonging to the Central Oklahoma Water Resource Authority include El Reno, Yukon, Mustang, Piedmont, Okarche, Calumet and Union City.

One reason they want the Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer water is because of its purity. Canadian County's present primary water source is the Garber-Wellington Aquifer which contains a level of arsenic too high for federal standards scheduled to take effect in 2006. At that time, the Environmental Protection Agency will reduce the amount of arsenic allowed in drinking water from 50 parts per billion to 10.

Although the members of the Central Oklahoma Water Resource Authority have expressed interest in getting water from Arbuckle-Simpson, El Reno has also taken other precautions.

Eighteen local wells serve El Reno's needs and the city spent \$1 million in 2001 on a water plant.

Cities in the Metro area are weighing the cost of buying water from Oklahoma City against the cost of the pipeline from Arbuckle-Simpson. Currently, they believe costs are comparable and have indicated they are not satisfied with buying water from Oklahoma City.

Dick Scaff, a member of the Ada Water Resources Board, believes the authority will discover the expense of transporting water from the Ada area to the west metro-area cities will be too high.

Total costs will depend in part on how many communities actually sign up for the water and how much they agree to buy.

Present plans call for PESA to finance the project with Central Oklahoma Water Resource Authority members repaying the firm by buying water. Pay out is expected to take 20 years. When the pipeline is paid for, the authority will own it.

In addition to the initial \$200 million for the pipeline, which will pump the water from Arbuckle-Simpson Aquifer to a central point in Canadian County, another system would be needed to transport the water to each of the purchasing communities.

The authority will look at various funding sources, including grants, bonds and sales taxes.

Oklahoma Water Resources Board records indicate 61 landowners near Ada have permits to draw water from Arbuckle-Simpson. Full approval of the nine-member board is required for these permits, which are issued for public water supplies as well as irrigation and industrial purposes.

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