

Douglas Daily Dispatch

Napolitano signs water district bill

By Ted Morris/Wick News Service

SIERRA VISTA - Gov. Janet Napolitano on Wednesday signed into law a measure that, if approved by area voters, will establish local political authority over the Upper San Pedro Subwatershed.

The creation of the Upper San Pedro water district could ultimately lead to authorization of taxes, bonds and an infrastructure to bring water from afar to satisfy population growth.

"This district would be a replenishment district," said Herb Guenther, director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, speaking with the Herald/Review by telephone Wednesday afternoon.

"Its goal would be to develop replenishment supplies ... in other words, we're looking at augmentation of the existing supplies," he said.

Guenther added, "Conservation is a very important step in maximizing water resources. It is a way of stretching your water budget, and it is the least expensive way of expanding your water budget. Following that is re-use, but after that ... you need to import sustainable supplies, and that's where this replenishment district comes in, to take on the next horizon, if you will, to provide long-term sustainable water resources for this area."

Guenther said replenishment could come from the Central Arizona Project, bringing water in a canal from Tucson, or it could come from old mines in the area. It could even come from yet-unplanned desalination plants in the Sea of Cortez in Sonora, Mexico. "That is a long-term solution, yes," Guenther said, predicting that most of the world will one day rely on water from the oceans.

The ADWR director said the pending water district is the first of its kind in Arizona. He said the proposal designates a management scheme to fit the goals established by the people in the Upper San Pedro Basin.

"You're really challenged down there," Guenther said. He noted that Cochise County is trying to preserve two national treasures.

"One is natural, and that is the San Pedro River and its environs ... and the second national treasure is Fort Huachuca, one of the most important military installations, not only in the Southwest, but also in this era of terrorist activities."

Fort Huachuca is Arizona's third largest employer. Its economic importance to the residents of Cochise County is keenly felt by local government leaders.

County Supervisor Pat Call, who represents the Sierra Vista area, reacted positively Wednesday to the enactment of House Bill 2300.

"That's good news," Call said. "There's no question. It gives the community an opportunity to participate in the water conversation. Up to this point, that conversation has been dominated by the **Center for Biological Diversity** and the Department of the Army."

Sierra Vista Mayor Bob Strain commented early Wednesday that the process of forming a local water district was "taking the water bull's-eye off of Fort Huachuca's back."

Carol Sanger, executive director of the Upper San Pedro Partnership, a consortium of 21 member agencies, commented Wednesday that the new law "represents an important step for local control over water resources in the Sierra Vista Subwatershed.

"It doesn't create a water district," she said, "but allows planning by an appointed board to present an informed perspective to the voters."

After the Board of Supervisors places the issue on the ballot, the voters will have a crack at deciding whether the water district should even be formed.

The debate is well under way.

For example, State Rep. Manny Alvarez, a Democrat from Elfrida, voted against the bill Monday, because he felt the bill added an unnecessary layer of government. Even though Alvarez won District 25 in last November's election, he lost in Cochise County against a staunch proponent of property and water rights, Gail Griffin.

Organizations such as the Southeast Arizona Association of Realtors Inc. are struggling with the issue. The association was asked to support the bill, but turned down the request.

"The board had a very lively discussion, and it was discussed at length, and we were unable and unwilling to endorse the bill," said association president Melissa Clayton, who is affiliated with RE/MAX HomeStores LLC.

There are some who outright oppose the bill.

Mary Ann Black, chairwoman of Hereford Natural Resource Conservation District, was reached for comment.

"I'm terribly disappointed in our legislators," Black said Wednesday. "They totally ignored the facts and passed that bill anyway."

She said the conservation district has recommended a stormwater-harvest plan, "and it's extremely important that they do that, and they've just danced around it and haven't implemented those regulations that they needed to, both the city and the county."

Black said the conservation district can do everything that the bill says it can do in the way of projects, "and we have that statutory authority."

Sanger responded to that by saying, "Natural Resource Conservation Districts are an important partner for all of the agencies committed to saving the river, so to speak, but if it were as simple as 'the Natural Resource Conservation Districts can do it,' we still have the problem with us. With the work that the partnership has done, the challenge before us is larger than the resources that the Natural Resource Conservation Districts have at their disposal."

Sanger added, "The challenge before us is in acre-feet, not gallons."