

Aquifer is Key to city's future

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Commissioners' Corner

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Alamogordo will host an event that is critical to our future, an event that will analyze the largest fresh water aquifer in our state -- the one under the Otero Mesa in southern Otero County. We urge all Otero County residents concerned about our water to come to this important meeting. It will take place today, April 19, at the Elks Lodge on 2290 Hamilton Road, from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

As we all know, Alamogordo has one of the strictest water ordinances in the state. We also cover our city's water reservoir to prevent evaporation, and use reclaimed water on our golf course and parks. We understand that the preservation and conservation of clean water is essential to the long-term viability of our community, our economy and our livelihoods. We also understand the need to develop new water resources, which is why our community is considering spending millions of dollars to develop desalinization.

Our community now must look south to the aquifer under the Otero Mesa as being one of the best sources of water for our community's future water supply. But our community must protect this resource and act now if we are to take advantage of this tremendous opportunity.

Just south of Alamogordo lies a vast stretch of Chihuahuan desert grassland called Otero Mesa. Not only is this land abundant in wildlife, but it also holds New Mexico's largest untapped fresh water aquifer.

A preliminary report recently issued by Sandia National Labs, the Interstate Stream Commission and the U.S. Geological Survey reported that there is at least 57 million cubic feet of water under Otero Mesa, in the Salt Basin aquifer. That's more than 18 million gallons of potable drinking water.

As most of us know, the federal government has proposed allowing oil and gas development on Otero Mesa. Yet, the scary part about this push to drill is that the federal agencies in charge of managing this oil and gas development have admitted that groundwater contamination is likely, if drilling is allowed to move forward. In other words, if we allow drilling to move forward, we may pollute this aquifer forever.

The report went on to state that recharge areas (areas where the water goes underground and moves to the aquifer) of the Salt Basin aquifer are generally vulnerable to the introduction of contaminants and that the basin contains areas of rapid groundwater movement, which can make the entire system susceptible to the spread of pollution.

Last year, the state Oil Conservation Division, an agency within the New Mexico Energy, Minerals and Natural Resources Department, issued a report that found approximately 1,400 cases of groundwater contamination in the state, due specifically to oil and gas

operations. That's 1,400 reasons why we need to stop any oil and gas development that can pollute our aquifer until more is known about it, and we work first to protect this vast water resource.

The state legislature just allocated \$1 million to further study the Salt Basin aquifer, and the federal government is looking to kick in an additional \$500,000 so that we can fully understand everything about this large, untapped water resource. Recently, a coalition of sportsmen and other groups called on our congressional delegation to put in place a three-year moratorium on all oil and gas development in Otero Mesa.

The reasoning is clear: water is the most important resource to our community and state, and no matter what regulations are in place, oil and gas development can and often does contaminate our precious groundwater.

Today, at the Elks Lodge in Alamogordo, there will be a free public forum about Otero Mesa and the Salt Basin aquifer. A representative with the Interstate Stream Commission will be on hand to talk about the recent studies of the Salt Basin.

In addition, other experts and speakers will discuss wildlife, energy policy and the impact of modern day oil and gas development on the land.

If you care about fresh, available water for our future, then we strongly encourage you to attend this public forum. New Mexicans have continued to support oil and gas development on close to 6 million acres of land in our state. But we must be prudent when it comes to our limited water resources. We cannot gamble with our future water supplies, which will ultimately determine our future economic vitality and quality of life as Westerners and New Mexicans.