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The war over water

A plan to drill city wells on Yamhill County farmland sets up a battle between urban and rural needs

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By Dana Tims of The Oregonian staff

DAYTON -- A war over water is pitting rural residents against city dwellers in one of Oregon's fastest-growing areas.

Before it's over, say those on both sides, the conflict is likely to determine development patterns for decades to come in areas that only a few years ago seemed far beyond the reach of the Portland area's growth.

"The cities want to urbanize our farmland," says Tim Kreder, a second-generation farmer who with his brother manages about 1,100 acres in the verdant heart of Yamhill County. "If that happens, I promise you this: Within our lifetime, there will be nothing but houses stretching from one end of this valley to the other."

The Yamhill County towns of Dayton and Lafayette, perched within three miles of each other near the Willamette River and about 35 miles southwest of Portland, want to augment their failing wells by drilling new ones in land now zoned for exclusive farm use. State land-use laws allow cities to tap farmland for water, but only when there are no other reasonable alternatives.

The proposal is not without precedent, but land-use experts are hard-pressed to cite more than two or three examples where cities have received authorization to use or cross farmland for necessities such as water, sewer and power lines. In this case, the use involves drilling the wells, building a treatment

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plant to purify the water and laying enough pipe to connect the wells with both cities.

The \$5.2 million plan has farmers and agricultural interests seething. There is only so much water seeping through the aquifers beneath their lands, they say. They are convinced that sticking Dayton- and Lafayette-size straws into the groundwater below their fields will have farmers pumping nothing but air during the summer irrigation season.

Mike Brandt, Yamhill County's planning director, approved the cities' joint application. He said their proposal to use farmland for urban purposes meets the difficult legal standard of being "necessary" because the cities have nowhere else to go for water.

Farmers formed the Dayton Prairie Water Association and are appealing the decision. Yamhill County's commissioners have scheduled a public hearing for today in McMinnville to take testimony that should result in a decision within a month or so.

Representatives of both sides say the commission's ruling will not be the last word. Each promises to appeal an adverse decision to the state Land Use Board of Appeals and beyond, if necessary.

Growth taps towns' resources

A decade ago, Dayton and Lafayette were viewed as destination points only by Portlanders mulling a Sunday drive in the country.

But steady growth throughout the 1990s, powered by people spilling out from Portland, Salem and McMinnville in search of cheap land and a slice of solitude, stretched both towns to their limits. Lafayette's population of 2,140 has increased by nearly 40 percent since 1993. Dayton, slightly smaller at 1,920 residents, has grown by about 20 percent.

"There's been a tremendous amount of growth in those two communities," says Dave Potter, a McMinnville Realtor. "The push is on, and it is certainly from the metro area."

The cities' urban growth boundaries still have ample room for new houses and apartment complexes. But without water, growth is out of gas, administrators in both cities say.

Besides, the cities contend, farmers drive on city

streets and send their children to city schools. Lines on zoning maps dividing urban land from farmland may be stark, they say, but the people who live on either side of that divide blend much more than farmers may admit.

"It isn't us versus them," says Sue Hollis, Dayton city administrator. "We're all in this together."

Plan is called cheap, efficient

Hollis, along with her Lafayette counterpart, Bob Willoughby, says that drilling two or three wells in nearby farmland will tap a bountiful aquifer in the cheapest and most efficient way possible. They cite engineering studies showing that farmers' existing wells won't be affected by the additional draw-down.

Tapping the Willamette River for drinking water is not an option, they say. Scientific tests regarding the safety of the water are not yet definitive and, more importantly, such a plan would cost millions of dollars more than the cities can hope to raise by increasing water rates.

"We're convinced we can take the water we need for a few months each year and not negatively affect that resource," Willoughby says. "There's enough water there for everyone."

Agricultural interests, including the Yamhill County Farm Bureau and the Oregon Farm Bureau, are lining up behind local farmers such as Kreder. They helped defeat a similar attempt two years ago by Newberg to drill new wells in exclusive farm-use land in northern Marion County and vow to also turn this one back.

"We are extremely wary about anything that takes farmland and makes it urban," says Joe Hobson, the Oregon Farm Bureau's legal counsel. "We're not looking to push cities over the brink of extinction, but we have to draw the line somewhere."

Kreder agrees. Because he and other farmers in the area are prohibited from using Willamette River water for irrigation, they must rely solely on wells. Any erring should be done in favor of agricultural uses, he says.

"They see the water that's under my farm as the mother lode that will solve all their problems," Kreder says. "If they are wrong in their engineering estimates, I'm the one who is going to lose."

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