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Tri-county GWDs differ over water lobbyists

By Andrew Stuart
Staff writer

The image of unity that has characterized water interests in Far West Texas in the wake of the Rio Nuevo proposal showed signs of fissure last week as Tom Beard, a prominent player in regional water issues, criticized decisions made by the Jeff Davis and Presidio county groundwater districts.

Beard, chair of both the Brewster county groundwater district and the Far West Texas Regional Water Planning Group, criticized the Jeff Davis and Presidio districts' decision to retain lobbyists Sabrina Brown and Ron Lewis, who, he said, are closely linked to water marketing interests, in a strongly worded June 3 letter to The Big Bend Sentinel.

"Our (their) new lobbyists believe in water marketing," Beard wrote. "It's their bedrock belief. Why should we pay anything to someone who believes exactly the opposite of what we believe?"

The Brewster county groundwater district currently plans to hire lobbyist V.A. Stevens, at a fee of \$1,000 a month -- using funds authorized by Brewster commissioners. Beard, who has spearheaded the effort to hire Stevens, had expressed hope that other regional groundwater districts would come on board with the Brewster plan and help cover the cost of retaining Stevens.

Sabrina Brown is the daughter-in-law of former state Senator J.E. "Buster" Brown, who, along with Lewis -- who is a former state representative -- helped author the bill creating a state water plan in the 1997 legislative session.

In their legislative careers, Beard said, Buster Brown and Lewis pressed for measures that undermined the local control of groundwater resources while facilitating water marketing and export. Brown himself previously chaired the water marketing outfit Water Texas, and as a lobbyist, now represents Mesa Water, a company pursuing water marketing projects in the Panhandle.

Sabrina Brown and Lewis also represent the Tigua, or Ysleta del Sur tribe, which has applied for federal trust status for land it owns in Presidio and Jeff Davis counties. Trust status would exempt the tribe from paying local property taxes and from the pumping limits and rules imposed by local groundwater districts. Both Beard and his wife, Brewster County Judge Val Beard, have raised concerns that the tribe might pursue water export projects on its land. Brown and Lewis have said that they represent the Tiguas only on issues related to gambling.

Albert Miller, chair of the Jeff Davis groundwater district, said that he understood Beard's concerns, but that the Brown-Lewis proposal seemed like an affordable means of keeping in touch with water-related action at the

state capital.

"How many lobbyists can you find that would have none of that?" Miller said. "We felt that they were the best to represent us. Our biggest interest is to maintain a line of information."

In hiring Brown and Lewis, the Presidio and Jeff Davis groundwater districts join a coalition of about 30 districts from across the state, known as the Texas Groundwater Districts Coalition. The two counties will each pay \$50 a month for the lobbyists' services.

Miller said that the Jeff Davis groundwater district might still have an interest in joining with the Brewster district in retaining Stevens. With its sparse population, the Trans-Pecos needs to stand together on water issues, Miller said.

"My personal feeling is that we need to resolve this and go forward as a united front," he said. "I can't stress how important I think that is."