

# Ranchers oppose natural gas pipeline deal

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ELKO, Nev. -- Nevada ranchers concerned about the potential impact on livestock grazing are upset about a deal between the builder of a 680-mile natural gas pipeline and two environmental groups that agreed to drop their opposition to the project stretching from Oregon to Wyoming.

El Paso Corp. agreed earlier this month to contribute \$20 million over the next 10 years toward conservation efforts in the pipeline corridor to be overseen by the Idaho-based Western Watersheds Project and Oregon Natural Desert Foundation.

Both groups have indicated they intend to use some of the money to buy out grazing permits from willing sellers on federal land, with the intention of permanently retiring the permits issued by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service.

"The livestock industry is about as upset about this issue as it has been for a long time. We're going to fight it tooth and nail," said Sen. Dean Rhoads, R-Tuscarora, an Elko County rancher who chairs the Nevada Legislative Committee on Public Lands.

Part of the pipeline would pass through the ranch owned by Rhoads, who requested officials for the Houston-based El Paso appear before the legislative panel at its meeting Friday in Ely.

El Paso spokesman Richard Wheatley said they would be there.

"We will make our case and explain our position," El Paso spokesman Richard Wheatley told the Elko Daily Free Press.

Rhoads said there would be major economic harm to small communities if ranchers sold grazing permits, and the government could retire those permits. The latter would require congressional approval.

"Hopefully, my committee will take some action, perhaps a letter to the congressional delegation asking them not to support such a concept," Rhoads said, adding that he wouldn't have agreed the pipeline could go through his ranch if he had known El Paso would enter into an agreement with the two environmental groups.

The public lands panel also will hear from the Nevada Cattlemen's Association, the Western Legacy Alliance and others on the threat to grazing permits.

Jon Marvel, executive director of the Western Watersheds Project, said last week that El Paso's agreement would allow for significant protection of the health of the range and the fish and wildlife that live there.

"It's unprecedented to have the support of industry to work for the retirement of public grazing permits," he said.