

Ranchers prevail in CBM water case

CHEYENNE (AP) — The Wyoming Environmental Quality Council has sided with a ranching couple who contested a discharge permit for coal-bed methane water that was issued by the state.

A landowner group says the ruling could have important implications for Wyoming's large coal-bed methane industry, though state officials expressed doubt that Thursday's vote would have a wide-ranging effect.

The council sided 4-2 with Marge and Bill West, who contested a permit held by Stephens Energy Company. The Wests have lost 100 acres of haymeadow and 200 cottonwood trees because of salt buildup from coal-bed methane water flowing across their Powder River Basin property, said the couple's attorney, Kate Fox, of Cheyenne.

The Wests argued that the state Department of Environmental Quality issued the permit last year using rules since criticized as unscientific by the Environmental Protection Agency and by consultants for the state.

About 170 of the 1,000 or so active water discharge permits in the Powder River Basin have been granted under the rules. Thursday's ruling in theory could open the way for more permits to be contested.

The state, however, has held off issuing permits under the criticized rules since fall and most landowners have shown little interest in contesting permits, said John Wagner, head of the department's Water Quality Division.

"I'm not sure that it's that big of a deal," he said Friday.

The Wests are members of the Powder River Basin Resource Council, a Sheridan-based landowner group. The group's chairman, Bob LeResche, said his organization is concerned about all permits granted under the rules, especially considering that many of the permits will be up for renewal before long.

"This decision kind of brings it to a head," LeResche said.