

Sitting around the water table



DRM Inc. employee Rick Morris unscrews the water hose connected to the Water Co. Water Loading Facility after filling about 1,700 gallons of water into the water truck Thursday afternoon. Water is used to compact the soil of construction sites around Gillette. "You've got to add a lot of water to it," said Morris. "If you can't get compaction, it will settle no matter what's sitting on top." - News-Record photo by Sarah Voegelé

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Some say the drought is over, but for some industries, it may have just begun.

Dan McKillop, owner of DRM Inc., builds his business on making sure new buildings or roads don't sink into the ground.

Without water, the earth that is disturbed in the construction process would settle, and whatever was built on top of it would seep with it.

Earlier this year, his main supply of water was shut down for two months and he had to use surface water from a pond northeast of the city.

"We had to find another source, which was, of course, a longer haul. And that makes it more expensive for us," McKillop said.

The problem isn't limited to just the peak construction months. Even with the recent rains, the ground a few feet below the surface is still too dry to not need added moisture after it's been disturbed.

Finding a place to buy water for industrial use has become a little more complicated recently than what it used to be. Aquifer draw down

Two main water suppliers" the City of Gillette and the Gillette-Campbell County Airport" have stopped providing the service to the industry.

- City of Gillette: In the wake of continued diligence in its water conservation efforts, the city voluntarily cut off its sale of bulk water this winter. A study that the city had done last year indicated that the water infrastructure that is in place now won't be adequate to supply water for residents in the next 30 years. In the long-term, the city plans to build a new 42-mile pipeline from the Madison well field north of Moorcroft.

The city has implemented a short-term plan to re-drill five wells this summer that draw water from the Fort Union, a geological formation or aquifer that supplies soft water. Those wells will increase the city's draw from the aquifer significantly, said Utilities Director Mike Muirhead.

- Airport: Water sold at the airport was stopped after the entity failed to secure a permit from the Wyoming State

Engineer's Office to draw more water from its well.

The airport is in the process of appealing the state engineer's decision. Airport officials are waiting for a hearing date, said Airport Director Jay Lundell.

It can still sell water within its original permit for 2.4 million gallons a year, but not at the 55.2 million gallons a year they need for the business, Lundell said.

Reasons for declining the airports application were based on the state engineer's study of water levels in the Fort Union.

Lisa Lindemann, groundwater division administrator, said that based on the data collected in the Gillette study of the Fort Union that shows declining water levels and increased use, the office is of the opinion that the water in the aquifer should be reserved as potable drinking water.

Lindemann said it would help the airport's cause if it drills deeper into another aquifer such as the Lance-Foxhills formation.

"We're not saying 'no water hauling,'" Lindemann said. "We're saying 'go deeper.'"

Private industry

About 34 customers used the airport for their water needs, and most of them have had to find alternative sources.

One such source is Water Co., a private company owned by Michael Von Flatern and Frank Latta.

Water Co. operates two water load-out facilities in the area: One on Southern Drive and another off Interstate 90 on the Dead Horse Creek Road in Johnson County.

The well in town is now running on a six-month permit from the State Engineer's Office after being shut down for two months this spring. The engineer's office is of the same mind on the Water Co. permit as it was on the airport. Engineer's office officials have said the only way for Water Co. to get a new permit after the six months is to drill deeper, Von Flatern said.

Lindemann said a difference between Water Co.'s permit and the airport's permit is that the airport was in full compliance with the permit application process, but that Water Co. was not.

Those compliance issues had to do with confusion over an original well permit that ended in 2006. At the time the permit ended, Water Co. applied and received an enlargement permit that was supposed to end in 2010, but the engineer's office is of the opinion that the loss of the original permit overrode the enlargement permit, Von Flatern said.

Water Co. only sells non-potable water from its load-outs. He said the two-month shut down really hurt his customers who needed the water for construction activities.

"There were a lot of businesses cut short." Von Flatern said. "They were using that water for boring and for dust suppressant and whatever else, and all of a sudden there was none in the whole town."

Von Flatern added that the engineer's office has recommended his company drill down to a different aquifer. He said that he hasn't decided to do that yet, and will evaluate the economic factors before deciding to invest more into the business.

He doesn't think that drawing 2 million gallons a month will hurt the aquifer as much as the state engineer does. He argues that since the city won't be drawing from the Fort Union in 30 years and that they at one time thought the Fort Union could support the entire city when the southern well field was proposed, that the water won't be as drawn down as engineers fear.

"Since that well field has gone away, there's that whole other area that they actually considered could have produced the water, so in our mind, why the heck are we bothering anybody?" Von Flatern said.

Methane water haulers

Sixty percent of Water Co.'s business comes from the coal-bed methane industry, Von Flatern said. The rest is made up of contractors and other miscellaneous customers.

Magna, a methane-oriented business that delivers water for methane producers and does some construction, has found its alternative source of water by leasing a well, said manager Myron Means.

The company was surprised when the airport water facility, of which they were a top customer, was shut down. He said many of the producers have started using treated discharge water for their needs, which include drilling, compaction and methane stimulation purposes. He said it wasn't a big deal to them because of the other sources.

Jim Rodgers, who owns Jim's Water Service and is another hauler for methane companies, is not too worried about the water situation because he has his own source of surface water northeast of Gillette.

He said the surface water works fine for drilling methane wells, as long as chlorine is added to remove the unwanted bacteria. But the people who will see a real problem are the dirt contractors like DRM.

Rick Morris, a driver for DRM, said he usually drives up to 16, 3,400-gallon loads a day to condition the soil for compaction.

McKillop didn't want to say what alternatives his company might undertake should the situation get worse.

"If we get hot, dry weather, and Water Co. doesn't have any available, then I guess I don't know where we're going to go," McKillop said.