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Tuesday, March 16, 2004

Lab To Build Water Database

By Adam Rankin
Journal Staff Writer

Soon the public and regional officials looking to understand the region's water resource will have a single, convenient Web-based source of information.

By creating a Water Research Technical Assistance Office and a Web-based water database, Charlie Nylander says he is looking to fill a niche.

The public will be able to easily access reams of data on everything from stream flow and precipitation to well production.

"The whole water issue in this area has become so much more important now that we are in this long-term drought, I felt we might be able to step into the breach and fill the need for a clearinghouse ... of information," said Nylander, manager of Los Alamos National Laboratory's ground-water protection program.

Looking beyond the water issues underlying LANL to the rest of the Española Basin, stretching from just south of Santa Fe north to Abiquiu, the office will "serve as a neutral party to promote the scientific collaboration and sharing of water resources data and information," he said.

Right now, Nylander said he is in preliminary discussions with Santa Fe

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County over sharing office space in the county's administration building so the water office will have a presence in the community.

As the region's ground water comes under increasing demand from new domestic wells and thirsty regional water systems, state and local water officials are fast identifying gaps in their understanding of the stressed resource.

Three years ago, the U.S. Geological Survey helped to coordinate the Española Basin Technical Advisory Group and a yearly workshop where water experts present and share their research and data to avoid future overlaps and determine what the water research priorities should be.

But that group only meets formally once a year and despite fostering networks among state, federal and local officials it has not created a single warehouse of information, so researchers still have to shop around for the data they need.

In addition to collecting and presenting basic water data— such as aquifer recharge rates, water chemistry, and ground water flow— the office will also provide educational materials and coordinate guest speakers and assist local communities with water-related economic development.

"So far, I have seen nothing but enthusiastic reactions to the idea," Nylander said.

Water managers eager to see the office take shape include officials with Santa Fe city and county.

"No one single agency has taken on the role of being the warehouse of hydrogeologic data," Claudia Borchert, a hydrologist with the city of Santa Fe's water division, said recently. "For there to be such a place would be very helpful."

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By pooling knowledge and information of the region's water, policy makers and water experts can make better decisions about managing the resource, she said.

Stephen Wust, the county's hydrologist, said the water office could expand the network of researchers and water experts already coordinating information around the region.

But he said it will only truly be successful if all groups, from local governments to area pueblos, contribute.

"Either everybody is in, or it is not going to work," he said.



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