

8D Rocky Ford farmers file to sell water to Aurora

By Jim Hughes

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A coalition of Otero County farmers filed transfer papers Wednesday seeking the right to sell their shares of the Rocky Ford Ditch Co. to the city of Aurora.

If approved in a Pueblo water-court hearing later this winter, the deal would see 5,000 acre-feet of water — enough to keep 25,000 people in water for a year — transferred to the city of Aurora for more than \$15 million.

The sale of water from the Rocky Ford region, famous for its melons, onions and corn, has been described by some farmers looking to sell as the best chance they have of making any money on their land. They called on Aurora water agents last spring, said Doug Kemper, Aurora's manager of water resources.

The transfer papers were filed jointly Wednesday by the city and the Rocky Ford Ditch Sellers Group.

"We're optimistic that this is something

that's going to go through," Kemper said. "Agricultural transfers have been the one thing that most municipalities have had success with over the past 30, 40 years of water-resources development."

The transfer hearing will see some objectors, though, including Attorney General Ken Salazar and the Southeastern Colorado Water Conservancy in Pueblo. Objectors have until the end of February to file their intent to object.

To try to appease residents of the area around Rocky Ford, Aurora officials expect to pay for consultants to come to the area to figure out what the local economy will look like after so many farmers shut down their operations.

"If there's nothing in it for the local community, there's really nothing they can do except stand up and fight," Kemper said. "From our standpoint, if there are ways of heading toward a win-win solution, the net result is we all benefit from it."