

# Well water dropping to critical levels

By DEBBIE PITTMAN

ALAMOSA — Drought conditions are becoming critical, causing water wells to dry up at an alarming rate throughout the Valley.

"Over 56 wells in the Valley have gone dry since April 1st," said Steve Vandiver, Division Engineer for Water Division 3, Colorado Division of Water Resources. The Division's office has been busy processing well replacement paperwork that has been coming in at a high volume, with 10 applications on Monday, alone.

Vandiver said replacement well requests are 10 times the normal amount they receive. "Most of the wells are located in

the La Jara and Capulin area, but we're seeing problems in all areas of the Valley," he said.

Vandiver said affected wells are at varying levels, from shallow wells to 200 foot deep wells.

"In fact," said Vandiver, "the Baca Water and Sanitation well, which is a big well, is starting to surge and there is some concern about what to do with it." He said with the Rio Grande Canal as the lone exception, none of the major ditches on the Rio Grande River were able to be turned on this year.

Well owners have tried to lower the pumps on their wells to reach water, but most of these wells aren't deep enough to allow this strategy to succeed, or the casing

is too small to lower a pump into. The only alternative is to drill a new well.

"Some of these wells are fairly shallow," said Vandiver. "What's alarming is the fact that even with these shallow wells, we have never had any particular problems with them before and we've gone through some fairly dry years in the past 20 years."

Well drillers from around the Valley say they've been getting lots of calls from people whose wells have "gone dry."

Charles Pythian, owner of Pythian Drilling of Sanford, said that a majority of problem wells are two inches in diameter, drilled in the 50's, and too small to allow a pump to be lowered to

reach the receding water level.

"While not necessarily 'drying up', the water level has lowered to the point where it cannot be pumped, requiring replacement wells to be drilled deeper," he

said.

"I think the problem is statewide," said Pythian, "not just Valleywide."

■ Please see Wells page 2

# Wells

■ Continued from Page 1

## Low snowpack sign of things to come

The San Luis Valley's unconfined aquifer relies heavily on the flow of the Rio Grande, as well as winter snowpack. That's what recharges the aquifer as it gets used. With this year's drought conditions literally off the scale, there is absolutely nothing recharging the underground water supply.

Vandiver said that until May, 2002, the lowest recorded May on the Rio Grande had occurred in May, 1890. This month appears headed toward yet another record low flow.

"It's significantly lower than anything we have ever seen," Vandiver said. "The double whammy is that you've got the wells pumping real hard with this hot, dry weather and virtually no recharge from any source like ditches or anything. We are seeing a difficult situation here, where the groundwater table is going to continue dropping very hard because of the fact that we are not getting any recharge of any kind. The weather we are having is contributing to really high use."

Low humidity, brisk winds and unseasonably warm temperatures are combining to sap not only agricultural and residential soils, but also the rivers, themselves.

The Rio Grande peaked at a 680 cubic feet per second (cfs) flow this spring. That is about 10 percent of the normal range (5,000-6,000 cfs) the river records during the spring, Vandiver said.

The Rio Grande is not alone in its low flow.

"Daily water flows of several creeks are approaching some of the lowest we have ever seen," Vandiver said. "Trinchera Creek and Ute Creek are particularly bad. Los Pinos on the Conejos south of Antonito was 7 cfs on Monday morning, which is an all-time low during summer months."

Vandiver said it's not uncommon for June 6 to provide the Rio Grande with its highest flow of the year, around 6,000 cfs. In contrast, June 6 this year saw the river recording a paltry 264 cfs.

## Impacts are everywhere

Farmers are going to be severely impacted by this, Vandiver said. Ranchers who have always relied on ditches as water sources for their cattle and for their grass pastures are also realizing the impact as the ditches are dry. Residents whose domestic wells are going dry have also felt the impact of this record dry year.

Vandiver said the drought will also have a traumatic effect on the fish in Valley waterways. That assessment was also offered

by Division of Wildlife Fisheries biologist John Alves, who said low water levels and reduced flows could lead to summer kills in lakes and reservoirs. When creeks go dry, the fish that live there either die, or find themselves trapped in deep holes or beaver ponds until they, too, go dry.

The situation has brought about a number of enforcement issues, according to Vandiver, because people are diverting water they are not entitled to. He said the District has mediated lots of ditch squabbles that it is not really responsible for and is trying to help by also getting people to talk with one another, and help them understand what's going on.

"It's important for people to realize that, statistically, when we have a dry year, it takes several years to recover from it. Even if we get a lot of moisture next year, it's still going to take from six to eight years of good moisture to recover the water we've lost this year," he said.

"It's my hope that well owners will understand this, and how important recharge of the surface water into the aquifers is, and we need to do everything possible to manage those aquifers when water is available so we can minimize the impacts of these dry years," Vandiver added.

He also stated that one of the things water users can do to get out of this situation is to gain an understanding of the dynamics of underground storage. He said more emphasis needs to be placed on recharging the aquifer during fat years.

"To gain some education out of this, and an understanding by the ditch companies and well owners who draw water from these aquifers, would be an excellent thing to happen," Vandiver noted.

"A good snow year next winter is not going to cure this. This is going to be a multiple-year impact from this type of year. We are going to have to really stay informed and do what we can to recover from this," he said. "There are lots of little things we can do to help alleviate the situation by practicing good conservation."