

Marion County water project thirsts for funding

Cattle rancher Jerry Siebert sounds like a typical football coach when he talks about the future of beleaguered Marion County Rural Water District No. 5.

"We have to come to a decision whether we're going to carry the football, or throw the ball into the creek and let it float away," said Siebert, the board's vice-president.

More than 10 years after the district was organized, a project to provide water service to a sparsely-

collected nearly \$180,000 in deposits from approximately 130 households that signed up for service, Siebert said.

effort and all the frustration about getting the project underway, when the rubber hits the road, the need for

"I can't stress enough that all comes back to the need for water, and that's still there."

— Jerry Siebert

The water district board submitted its first federal grant application in February,

water is still here and it's not going to go away."

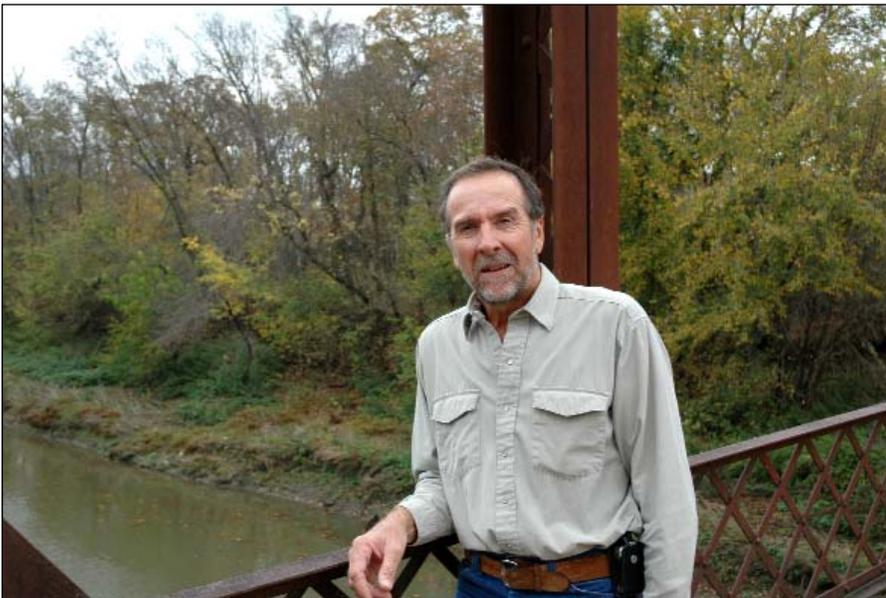
The district's financial woes have yet to disappear, either.

This summer the board agreed to pay a \$75,000 settlement in a \$176,000 breach of contract lawsuit that had been filed by a Wichita engineering firm hired in 1997 to design the water project.

The board had terminated the firm's contract in September, 2003, six months after the district failed to qualify for a federal grant to build phase one: a \$5 million project that would have served the original 130 householders who had paid deposits.

Gary Smith, Chief of Community Programs at USDA Rural Development, said that the project would have translated into \$100-per-month water bills for the average household users in the district, about twice the statewide average for established rural water districts.

"We had never financed anything at that level before,"



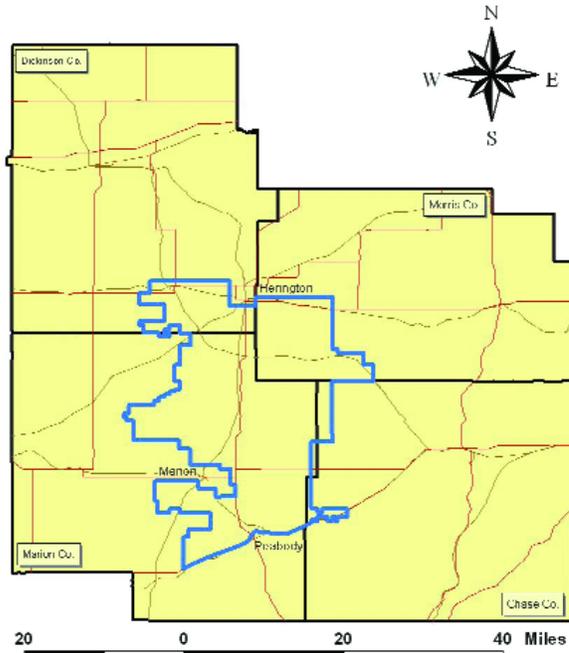
Jerry Siebert contemplates the future of southeastern Marion County. He is standing on an old iron bridge that spans the Cottonwood River that cuts through one of his pastures.

populated area of eastern Marion County has yet to get off the drawing boards, although the district has

1994 to the USDA Rural Development office in Topeka, initially proposing an \$8 million project to be built in five phases, ultimately serving as many as 250 households.

"I can't stress enough that all comes back to the need for water, and that's still there," Siebert said. "Despite all the

Rural Water District No. 5 Marion County (Proposed)



Smith said. "And we told them that we would have to question the feasibility of the project, and that furthermore, they would have difficulty in finding financing."

Siebert said USDA officials told board members to go back to Marion County and sign up another 50 households.

"That's always been our problem," Siebert said. "How do you get the 50 extra households when they're just not there, from a feasibility standpoint. You just can't lay five or 10 additional miles of water mains just to pick up three or four homes."

In the absence of water district service, which would purchase water from a municipal purification plant in Hillsboro,

The Marion County District No. 5 (Proposed) map at left is shown in blue. It is located at the juncture of Dickinson, Morris, Chase and Marion Counties.

EQUIPMENT

INTAKE SCREENING

PROCESS

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FILTRATION

membrane, gravity, pressure, packaged systems, tube settlers, underdrains, air/water backwash systems

CHEMICAL FEED

gas chlorination, gas sulfonation, liquid metering, lime slaker / silo, dry chemical feed, carbon dioxide, chlorine dioxide, scales, leak detectors

FLOW METERS

open channel, magmeters

DISINFECTION

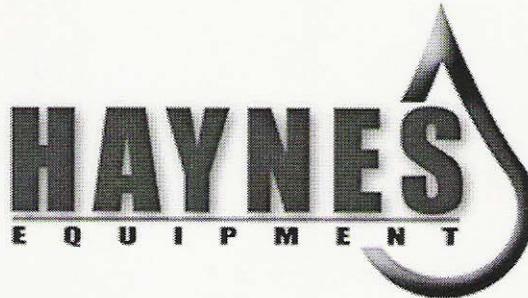
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" if we supply it, we make it work! "

households in the proposed district are forced to depend on unreliable well-water supplies for human consumption, as well as for livestock, Siebert said.

smaller project failed to get the USDA stamp of approval.

"We knew it had to be downsized, but once you do that, you've got people outside the new boundaries

consider is to redraw the district's phase-one project map to take advantage of a higher-density household base in a rural area 10 miles west and south of the original phase-one boundaries, Siebert said.

Siebert acknowledged that the revision would eliminate the families who put down \$1,500 deposits as earnest money to get the district on its financial feet.

"It all goes back to our people," Siebert said. "People still need good quality, reliable water. And about 99.9 per cent of our people have stood behind us, they've been good to the board. But we've got to have more users per mile to make this feasible, or come up with some other plan."

At a meeting of the RWD board on Sept. 9, no action was taken to restart the project, or to plan for a renewed campaign to contact more than 100 households that might be persuaded to join the district, says board president Ralph Richmond, a former commercial well-drilling contractor.

"I tell people that their wells are going to run dry, and one day they're going to wake up and wonder where the water is going to come from," he said. "Some of them understand that, and some of them don't."

Siebert said the settlement with Reiss & Goodness would be made from the district's water deposit fund, which contained an estimated \$180,000 earlier this summer, according to attorney Chris Costello, of Marion.

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— Ralph Richmond

Last February, the board returned to Topeka with a scaled-back proposal for a \$1.6 million project serving 65 households in a reduced coverage area. Although the revised plan's estimated per-customer monthly water bill had dropped to \$90, the

who need the water just as much as the guy inside the boundary," Siebert said. "So how do you think I feel when you have to tell your neighbor across the road that you can't pick him up for the system?"

According to Siebert, one option that the board might

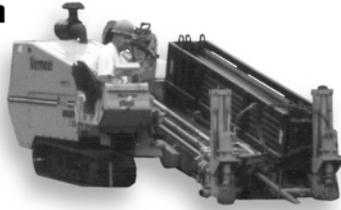
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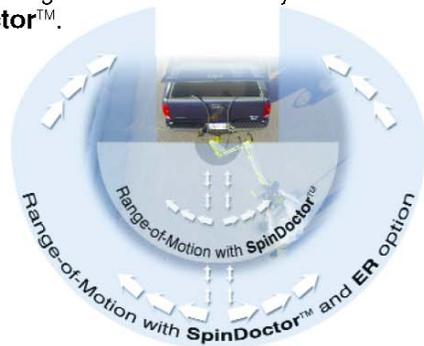
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