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Suncadia turns on spigot for upper Kittitas County

By David Lester

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A water bank for upper Kittitas County opened for business Thursday, and people are lined up to make withdrawals.

Officials of the Suncadia Resort and the state Department of Ecology signed water transfer documents making water available to people whose home construction projects have been on hold since a ban on new water wells went into effect last summer.

Ecology imposed the ban in July with a concern that rapid development relying on permit-exempt wells was harming senior water rights and stream flows.

So-called permit-exempt wells can be drilled without obtaining a state permit but are subject to being regulated if the use affects a senior water right.

Based on how the water will be used, Thursday's transfer of 163 acre-feet of water into the state trust water right program could supply the needs of more than 2,000 homes.

Requests the resort has received to date are for 400 new water connections.

Anticipated are additional transfers that will see the resort transfer more than 400 acre-feet of water into the program.

An acre-foot of water is about 325,000 gallons. The average home uses about 350 gallons of water per day.

The estimate of how many homes could be served with the transferred water is based only on indoor water use. If some water is used for small gardens or lawns, the number would be about 1,350 homes, officials said.

Joe Mentor, a Seattle attorney representing Suncadia, said initial requests for water range from individual connections to developments seeking as many as 100 connections.

Obtaining the water will come at a price that has not yet been determined, said Paul Eisenberg, the resort's senior vice president for development.

Purchase of the mitigation certificates can begin after a 30-day appeal period.

But applicants can begin submitting information to Suncadia to obtain what is called a mitigation certificate that allows them to use water.

Suncadia is a 6,400-acre residential and resort development near Cle Elum. The resort had to purchase senior water rights to supply the resort and was required to buy additional senior rights to offset expected development that would occur outside its boundaries.

It is that additional water, with a priority date of 1884, that is being made available to offset new uses.

Under the state's well ban, property owners and developers had to obtain mitigation water to offset their new use.

Tom Tebb, Ecology's regional director in Yakima, called the transfer an important day. He said the state's emergency rule banning new unmitigated water uses will remain in effect.

The current emergency ban expires on March 25, but Tebb said there is a real likelihood the ban will be extended.

Emergency rules remain in effect for 120 days and must be renewed.

The ban covers the part of the county west of Indian John Hill, east of Cle Elum. "This is so important because this is the first big block of water that will help folks who have expressed a hardship and have a need to move forward," he said.

Tebb added he sees water banking, in which willing buyers and willing sellers can agree on a price to move water to a new use, as the future for water marketing.

Those interested in obtaining a right to use water from the water bank can obtain more information by calling 509-649-6321.

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