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**Gregoire stands by ban on new wells in Kittitas County**

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OLYMPIA, Wash. -- For the second time, Gov. Chris Gregoire on Tuesday denied a request by Kittitas County commissioners that she order an end to a nine-month ban on new water wells in the upper county region.

In a letter to the county's three commissioners, Gregoire wrote that the water-supply issues that prompted the ban in July 2009 remain and could get worse because of a looming water shortage this summer.

"In my opinion, it is unfair and wholly inappropriate to allow new withdrawals of groundwater in an area where towns, irrigators and other water users, who hold water rights issues more than a century ago, are prohibited from using water," she wrote.

However, the governor is ordering the state Department of Ecology to adopt a permanent rule governing groundwater in upper Kittitas County. Doing so will require the agency to hold a public hearing at which residents can comment.

County commissioners, in a March 30 letter to Gregoire, asked for repeal of the emergency rule. They also questioned whether Ecology had followed state law in enacting a series of emergency rules that have kept the ban in place.

Impacts to senior rights and stream flows are the primary reasons the department imposed the ban last July in the wake of substantial housing growth in the county that relied on wells for domestic water.

The wells are exempt from state permit but can be regulated or prohibited if they affect the water supply of those who have senior rights.

County Commissioner Paul Jewell, who has represented the county throughout much of the discussions with Ecology officials, could not be reached for comment late Tuesday afternoon.

Commissioners and upper county residents have argued that the ban on new individual wells was unnecessary and damaging the local economy. Homeowners and developers can no longer build new wells for development unless they can purchase or use an existing right to offset the new use.

In her letter to commissioners Tuesday, Gregoire wrote that a number of positive steps have occurred since the ban was imposed. Among them are the water bank under which home owners and developers can purchase water placed in trust by Suncadia, the huge mountain resort near Cle Elum.

The governor also pointed to a Kittitas County proposal for a domestic water reserve under which the county would purchase water to offset new uses during drought years.

Money for the purchase would be made available by redirecting \$700,000 in state funds that were allocated for a groundwater study in upper Kittitas County, west of Indian John Hill. The study was aimed at measuring the extent of continuity between ground and surface water as a way to manage the overall water supply.

Gregoire told commissioners she has asked state Ecology Director Ted Sturdevant to work with the county to complete the domestic water reserve program as soon as possible.