

Panel: Flood or ditch

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Groundwork has been set that could limit the volume of water produced from coal-bed methane wells. But much legal and legislative scrutiny lies ahead.

The Legislature's Coal-Bed Methane Task Force reached consensus in Casper Thursday on two proposals brought by State Engineer Patrick Tyrrell. The first does not require a statutory change and would establish a water-to-gas threshold making the continued production of groundwater contingent upon producing a certain volume of gas.

More controversial is another proposal that does require a statutory change of the state engineer's authority. In event of flooding, or to prevent the flooding of low-lying pastureland with coal-bed methane water, the state engineer could order the construction of ditches.

Ditching isn't a favorable option, even to flooding, according to several landowners who provided comments to the task force. Critics said the measure does little to address the overarching problem of having significantly more groundwater on the surface than can be managed in the semi-arid Powder River Basin.

"If we perennialize these (ephemeral) streams and dig channels, it changes the entire hydrological regime that has evolved over eons," said Jill Morrison of the Powder River Basin Resource Council.

It was the last meeting of the task force, which was created two years ago to come up with potential solutions to managing coal-bed methane water. Task force officials will present both proposals, along with other recommendations, to two legislative committees this fall. The task force will then dissolve.