SPECIAL REPORT: GAS DRILLING & WATER

‘It’s been a blessing’

Landowners welcome water produced by energy activity

By CHRIS WOODKA

THE PUEBLO CHIEFTAIN

The forests in the hills west of Trinidad are filled with green pipes, industrial structures and constant signs that warn outsiders against both trespassing and smoking.

This is natural gas country.

It’s also cattle country, fish country, elk country and home to rugged individualists who see the water produced by coalbed methane operations as a godsend rather than a threat. “It’s been a blessing,” says Karen Salapich, a rancher who has organized her neighbors to push back against oil and gas regulations that could require companies to re-inject all water produced by drilling into deep aquifers where it might never be used. Dozen of others agreed during a daylong tour of places tucked into the hills west of Trinidad. These people acknowledge that some of the water coming out of the ground may be awful, but say a lot of it is not — particularly in their area.

They are asking state regulators not to waste water that could otherwise be used. “We’ve has a problem with drought and the county has lost a third or more of its livestock. If we didn’t have the CBM water, there wouldn’t be any. People couldn’t continue,” Mrs. Salapich said. CBM stands for coalbed methane, and rolls off **SEE DRILLING, 3A**

CHIEFTAIN PHOTOS/CHRIS WOODKA

A water discharge line is installed west of Trinidad. While some say water produced from oil and gas drilling could harm surface water quality, some landowners claim it has provided the only water for wildlife and cattle during the recent extreme drought.

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DRILLING

/ from page 1A Past practices by some companies in nearby Huerfano County have caused problems for landowners who say produced water of poor quality ruined cropland.

But in Las Animas County, many have conducted their own tests of water and found it to be of sufficient quality to support wildlife and livestock. They have photographed herds of elk and other animals drawn to CBM water holding ponds.

Todd Huffman is even using it to raise fish.

“It’s like a wildlife park,” Huffman says of Mitotes Lake, which he owns. “People come out here thinking they’ll see a nuclear waste dump, but look at it. It’s beautiful. . . . Take away the water and it’s gone.”

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CHIEFTAIN PHOTO/CHRIS WOODKA

Koi are being raised near Aguilar in well water fed through coal bed methane releases. Todd Huffman, who raises the fish, pays to test the water and has found no trouble.

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