

## SAN LUIS VALLEY

### Irrigators await OK on federal program

#### Payments would be made to fallow land, save water

By MATT HILDNER

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MONTE VISTA — Groundwater irrigators in the San Luis Valley are awaiting a pair of approvals for a federal program that would pay some to retire farmland and conserve water use.

Tim Davis, a consultant for the groundwater subdistrict that hopes to fallow 40,000 acres in the northcentral part of the valley, said Thursday that Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack still must authorize the Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program for the area. Moreover, the White House's Office of Management and Budget also must authorize spending for the program, which could send up to \$109 million in federal funds over 15 years to subdistrict farmers who fallow land.

"We're getting very close to putting this thing on the ground," Davis told farmers at the Southern Rocky Mountain Agricultural Conference and Trade Fair.

The subdistrict, which is entering its second year of operation, would add up to \$27.3 million in fallowing payments over the same period.

The subdistrict was designed, in part, to reduce the use of groundwater from the unconfined aquifer, which is at its lowest level since monitoring began in the 1970s. The federal payment would be \$175 per acre per year and allow farmers to use 18 inches of water over a 36-month period to establish a cover crop.

The subdistrict also would pay a share but will include bonuses to farmers who choose to fallow and sit just north of the Rio Grande between Monte Vista and Del Norte. The subdistrict's goal there is to restore a groundwater formation known as the hydraulic divide, which it hopes will reduce losses to the river caused by groundwater pumping.

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