

Watery jackpot: Ranchers drill, find abundant water resource

By Jomay Steen, Rapid City Journal Staff Writer

PLAINVIEW - After nearly five years of continuous drought, two Meade County ranchers took their chances by drilling into artesian water formations and hit a jackpot.

Plainview ranchers Arlie and Gretchen Radway and Dean and Joan Wink contracted with Weston Engineering of Wyoming to drill into the aquifers deep beneath the surface of their land after the ranches' water sources had turned bad or nearly vanished.

Last March, the Radway family took a calculated risk to move forward on their \$105,000 water project. Using an Environmental Quality Incentives Program, or EQIP, grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to pay 50 percent of the bill, the Radways began their quest for water.

Although engineers were fairly sure they would strike water, it wasn't foolproof.

"It was a tense time in my life," Arlie Radway said.

A month later, the Upton, Wyo., drilling rig punched into the Dakota water formation 3,050 feet below ground level. About 200 to 300 gallons of 127-degree hot water pours into Radway's holding tanks every minute.

When the drilling crews hit the artesian water, the Radways soon realized they had far more water than they could use for their cattle operation. They then offered to share their good fortune.

"What do you do with water but share it?" Gretchen Radway asked.

In December, the Radways helped form Plainview Water Cooperative with eight other Plainview ranch families.

Larry and Scott Sandal, John O'Grady, Robert Compton, Robert Jones, Allen Waterland, Harold Waterland, Dee King and Jim O'Dea paid the \$200,000 cost for the water distribution system and 15 miles of pipe that connects their ranches to Radway's well.

The cooperative charges a fee of \$2 per 1,000 gallons, the cost of production, Radway said. The 13,000 gallons of water used daily is mostly for livestock.

"Two thousand cows are on this addition," Radways said.

A year before the Radways' success, Dean and Joan Wink drilled 3,200 feet into the Lakota formation and hit a gusher at 350 gallons of water per minute. After two years of hauling water for their cattle, it was a welcome sight.

They also decided to help neighboring ranch families - who had requested to tap into their waterlines - by adding another 12 miles of pipe, Dean Wink said.

Plainview ranchers Paul and Debbie Delbridge, Ed and Gloria Hawks, Robert and Sharon Jones and Robert and LaVonne Hansen of Howes funded their own pipelines to connect to the new lines, he said.

"This is his baby, and I stand in awe of what he's accomplished," Joan Wink said of her husband's efforts to drill for water.

"It's the nature of ranching," Dean Wink said about hitting water nearly three-quarters of mile below the surface. "It is full of risk."

But water is different, Stacy Hadrack, Meade County Extension educator, said.

"Water is a critical component to raising livestock," Hadrack said.

Although weather changes seasonally, herd size can be reduced and ranchers can choose different feeds, water is a daily necessity.

The lack of water has been hard on the ranching community, Hadrick said.

In the past four years, her office has tested 250 water samples from as many water sources in Meade County to determine the water quality and whether stock could drink it. Some have had to keep stock away from bad water, leaving owners to either haul water on a daily basis or move cattle to a different location, she said.

"It's forced producers get a little more creative," Hadrick said.