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## Sand Dunes park called key to water future

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**ALAMOSA** - Efforts are progressing to resolve issues arising from the proposed conversion of the Great Sand Dunes National Monument into a national park, according to David Robbins, a lawyer with the Rio Grande Water Conservation District.

"Let's keep our eye on the ball," Robbins told about 80 San Luis Valley residents at a meeting Wednesday night.

If issues aren't resolved, he assured the group, the valley will be back to fighting outsiders who want to export the Valley's water.

For instance, one concern raised at the meeting several times by hunters - one man insisted upon calling it "game management" - revolved around placing the Sangre de Cristo Wilderness, now under the U.S. Forest Service, into the proposed national park under the National Park Service.

Hunting is prohibited in a national park.

Robbins, who is working with Colorado's congressional delegation "to be sure we have a bill satisfactory to the people of the San Luis Valley," said a similar hunting issue was addressed in legislation creating Death Valley National Park in California in 1994. The problem was solved by creating a "preserve" where hunting and recreational activities were permitted despite the National Park Service's operation of the area.

Such a provision could be drafted into legislation for a Great Sand Dunes National Park, Robbins explained.

Robbins disagreed with one audience member who maintained that the Great Sand Dunes National Monument, created by executive order by President Herbert Hoover in 1932, isn't worthy of becoming a national park.

He said the monument and surrounding area actually have more to offer than a number of areas that already are national parks. He also said the dunes are "deserving of protection even without the water," which many believe is crucial to the project.

The area has everything from tundra to desert, high mountain peaks to pulsating streams, and includes a ghost forest, where the trees have been covered by sand and defoliated, Folsom man archaeological digs, culturally scarred trees and every form of aquifer.

Robbins said valley residents should have two concerns that could be resolved if the Baca Ranch, to the northwest of the monument, is acquired for at least partial inclusion in a national park: the Rio Grande Compact of 1938 and the protection of ground water.

Under the Rio Grande Compact, "the people of Colorado are required to deliver specified and quantified amounts of water to the state line," Robbins said.

Colorado Water Division 3 engineer Steve Vandiver noted that all water in the Valley is appropriated and no new water development can occur.

If the Baca Ranch remains in private hands, there always will be a threat, Robbins said, adding that owners of the ranch will continue to devise ideas on how to market the water and attempt to acquire water they believe the ranch has rights to.

It also was noted at the meeting that the Closed Basin Project would be protected with the purchase of the Baca Ranch and its inclusion in a national park.

Robbins said he did not know the status of negotiations over the purchase of the Baca Ranch.

It was pointed out by several that water would be better protected in the hands of the federal government than under private ownership.

Also, it was noted that if the federal government acquires the Baca, existing water rights would be senior to whatever water rights the government applies for, and the federal government would have to go through Colorado's water court to obtain water rights.