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Brothers Blaine and Jeff Dougherty flip through old photos of their dryland wheat farm near Eltopia, Wash. on Nov. 22, 2008, as they talk about their grandfather buying the land in 1938. The brothers are fighting a proposed feedlot near their farm, fearing the water pumped to feed as many as 30,000 cattle would dry up their domestic wells. (AP Photo/Shannon Dininny)



## Wash. farmers fight proposed 30K-head feedlot

By SHANNON DININNY – 5 hours ago

ELTOPIA, Wash. (AP) — Farmers fighting farmers. Over water. In the arid West.

Sure, it's a saga many years old, but a new twist is brewing on Washington's rural nonirrigated lands, where fourth-generation farmers plant wheat and pray for rain. Sometimes there's a harvest — sometimes not — but they soldier on in homesteads whose only water supply comes from wells deep underground.

Some now fear their wells could dry up if a 30,000-head feedlot moves onto neighboring land in southeast Washington's Franklin County.

"Our main concern is our water. If we go dry, we have no recourse," said Blaine Dougherty, who with his brother still farms the land his grandfather bought in 1938.

Under laws dating back 60 years, the state allows some wells to be drilled without a permit, as long as water usage is held to 5,000 gallons per day. They include livestock watering, small industrial uses, domestic use or noncommercial watering of a small lawn or garden.

But in 2005, Attorney General Rob McKenna issued an opinion that barred the state from limiting the amount of water that ranchers draw daily for their livestock. Critics immediately argued it opens the state's water resources to unlimited use by large dairies and feedlots.

Enter Easterday Ranches Inc., one of the largest feedlots in the Northwest with 30,000 cattle near Pasco. Easterday has proposed building a similar feedlot on empty land near Eltopia, a tiny town east of the Hanford nuclear reservation.

The feedlot would be the first built in the Northwest in 30 years, he said, at a time when many feedlots have been forced to close by urban expansion. Packing plants have turned to Canada for as much as 40 percent of their cattle, all while consumers increasingly demand American beef. "We feel it's a good opportunity. We like the area, and the need's there to serve the packing plants," he said. "We picked the area because of its remoteness, proximity to the packing plants, highway infrastructure, everything."

County planners, who evaluated the proposal from a land-use perspective, already signed off on it. The state Department of Ecology also signed off on the proposed water use — at first. Ecology officials changed course, in part, Wednesday when they told Easterday the exempt well could only be used for watering cattle, not for other purposes, such as dust control. Easterday has estimated the feedlot's water usage at 433,183 gallons per day, give or take some depending on the time of year.

But standard dust control measures alone could require four times that amount of water, said Ken Slattery, Ecology's water resources program manager.

"We are not contesting that stock can drink an unlimited amount of water. We're contesting that all of the other uses that Mr. Easterday is assuming are covered under the stock watering exemption," he said.

Area residents are less than thrilled with the proposal.

There's no question they'll see increased dust, noise, traffic and contaminated runoff, even though Easterdays have a history of "top-notch" feedlots, Dougherty said. But the biggest concern remains water.

"We're afraid of our wells going dry because of the amount of water they'll be pumping out. On irrigated land, that's nothing, but here on dry land, that's a lot of water," he said.

Under the proposal, the amount of water that would be drawn is roughly equivalent to what would be used to irrigate 160 acres, according to Ecology officials.

The agency estimates the average feedlot cow consumes as much as 20 gallons of water per day. At 30,000 cows, that's enough water to nearly fill an Olympic-size swimming pool each day. Easterday says he is taking steps to avoid impairing anyone else's water right, by drilling to a deeper aquifer than most wells in the area, encasing the well and metering for water usage. Those steps were enough for a member of the county planning commission, also a neighboring farmer, to agree to the proposal.

And despite the recent letter, Easterday said Friday he's pushing forward with plans to use the well not only for stock watering, but also for misting, dust control and other uses.

"The legal definition includes anything an animal would need for a comfortable life. We're just following those guidelines. That's the law, and that's the law we're following," he said.

Still up in the air: Should the state limit how much livestock can be watered from an exempt well. So far, the state is following the attorney general's opinion on that point.

Easterday, himself a fourth-generation farmer, said other longtime farmers need to recognize the economic benefits of change done responsibly.

Taxable gross revenue on the property will increase from \$150,000 annually to about \$60 million, and the facility will generate \$1.6 million in annual payroll, he said.

"In Franklin County, agriculture is king," he said. "Any time we can create more agriculture in Franklin County, it's a good thing."