

## Farmers Union tries to answer water questions

By **JO DEE BLACK** • Tribune Business Editor •  
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The Montana Farmers Union fields questions regularly from members about water rights. Landowners want to know things such as what happens if water rights are unused or how much their water rights are worth.

More than two dozen people attended a workshop Monday designed to answer some of those questions, or at least introduce landowners to resources available to help them find answers.

"We've had several years of drought in some areas and that is prompting some inquiries," said Chris Christiaens, legislative and project specialist for the Montana Farmers Union, which organized the event. "We also have expansions of subdivisions and communities that need water and that is causing people to ask what the value of their water rights is."

Montana's water markets are in the early stages of development, said Deborah Stephenson, senior associate for WestWater Research in Bozeman.

There is limited trading, but overall the value of water resources is on the rise, she said.

"Water rights are an asset, they can be used as collateral for a loan; they can be bought and sold, they have a value for tax purposes and for leases," Stephenson said. "But, every water right is unique and there is not a statewide standard when it comes to values."

Instead, the state has submarkets when it comes to water rights, she said.

"For example, one market is the communities that are growing and looking to acquire new water rights for subdivisions or industrial projects," she said. "In the Big Horn area, we see water rights being looked at for industrial coal development.

"The discussion buzz now in Montana is water banking, where an owner goes through the process of getting a sale preapproved by regulators but there isn't a buyer," Stephenson said.

Establishing the value of a water right is a worthwhile effort, said Hertha Lund of Bozeman's Wittich Law Firm.

"You want to protect it," she said.

Bob Lassila, a dryland organic grain farmer in Cascade County, isn't sure if his land's water rights, which have not been used for irrigation or livestock, are still in place.

"There's a lot of technical stuff to this, but that's why I'm here, to try to get some answers," he said.

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