

Rabin okays W. Bank water drilling project

By JOEL GREENBERG
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Defence Minister Rabin has approved in principle a controversial water-drilling project in the West Bank which is to pump massive quantities of water from the Bethlehem area to Jerusalem.

Sources close to the project confirmed that Rabin gave his approval more than a week ago, and that legal aspects of the scheme were currently under discussion between legal advisers of the Mekorot water company and the defence establishment.

Bethlehem Mayor Elias Freij, who has warned that the project will deplete Arab water resources, has expressed his concern to officials at the U.S. consulate in Jerusalem. They are considering taking up the issue with the Israeli authorities. Freij told *The Jerusalem Post* this week that he may petition the High Court of Justice to stop the scheme.

The Judea and Samaria Civil Administration has made its agreement to the project conditional on compensation and the provision of an alternative water supply for Arab

communities whose wells could be depleted by the project. The administration is demanding guarantees of sufficient water at an equitable price to meet current and future demands of the Arab towns and villages. - 3 - 07 - 1987

Freij told *The Post* that he had little faith in guarantees, and that the plan should be scrapped.

The project is slated to pump 18 million cubic metres of water annually from a drilling site near Herodion, southeast of Bethlehem, and to supply most of it to Jerusalem and Jewish settlements, according to sources associated with the scheme. A quarter to a third of the water pumped is to go to Arab communities, the sources said.

Agriculture Minister Arye Nehamkin and top water officials said this week that the scheme would assure adequate water supplies to Arab villages and towns. They denied that the deep-drilling project would deplete existing wells, saying it would tap a different aquifer which is currently unexploited.