

The Daily Courier

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Talk of the Town

Column: 2016's water issues

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In 2016, Prescott and our region continue to face serious challenges when it comes to our limited water supply, but there are at least some solutions that the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) believes should be considered by our elected officials.

New annexations have been (or soon will be) approved by the City of Prescott. Developers are required to prove that they have at least 100 years of water available for their housing projects. Prescott has promised water for subdivisions from the Big Chino pipeline project, but it is by no means certain that the pipeline will ever be built because of its cost and the difficulty of mitigating the impact of pumping on the Upper Verde River.

Prescott, Prescott Valley and the Salt River Project are three years into an eight-year hydrological study investigating whether implementation of the proposed Big Chino pipeline will negatively impact the Upper Verde River. CWAG believes this study, if properly done, will confirm what the 2011 USGS computer model has already determined: that pumping about 12,000 acre-feet of water through the pipeline would result in dry spots in the river over time. Mitigating that reduction in baseflow would be challenging and could double the original estimated cost of the pipeline.

CWAG is also concerned about the impact of land development in the Big Chino on the Upper Verde River. In a recent discussion with Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) Statewide Active Management Area (AMA) Director Jeff Tannler, CWAG learned that agricultural interests in the Willcox area and ADWR are working together to draft a new regulatory mechanism that, if approved by the legislature, would limit new groundwater use in the Willcox region and address other issues related to protecting groundwater in locations outside AMAs. The proposed Groundwater Conservation Area represents an innovative state response to a problem brought to ADWR's attention by local citizens. Perhaps Yavapai County citizens could also seek an innovative management plan that would protect the Big Chino aquifer and the Upper Verde River.

Prescott's alternative water portfolio has been sharply reduced by both expected and unforeseen claims. Alternative water (supplies from sources alternative to pumping additional groundwater from the Prescott AMA, such as surface water, treated effluent and imported groundwater) is important because AMA rules prohibit the city from pumping groundwater within the AMA for new subdivisions. Some of the unforeseen claims are supported by contracts created decades ago and then misplaced or forgotten. Allocations from the alternative water portfolio have been temporarily suspended while the city develops new allocation criteria.

Instituting new landscape water ordinances for new construction that would prevent pumping groundwater for outdoor water use should be included in a list of water conservation options, including rainwater harvesting, that CWAG recommends the City of Prescott Water Issues Committee consider. Indirect potable reuse should also be discussed. (Using money provided by a grant, CWAG recently installed a state-of-the-art rainwater harvesting system at the Prescott Station restaurant.)

City of Prescott Contract No. 2015-008, intended to provide information to support Prescott's "Water Resources Management Services," was awarded in 2014. Although no specific completion dates were specified in the contract, CWAG was told that there would likely be a public presentation detailing the consultant's conclusions sometime during the second half of 2015. To date, no public presentation has been made. The contract includes research and analysis of projects related directly to future water security in our area: the city's Assured Water Supply (the Assured Water Supply program was created as part of the 1980 Groundwater Management Act and operates within Arizona's five AMAs), long range water planning, conservation options, the Big Chino pipeline and more. I contacted city staff and was told that the focus so far has been limited to the Assured Water Supply portion of the contract. CWAG believes the study could be useful and encourages the city to complete it as soon as possible.

Our responsibility as citizens is to practice personal conservation, stay informed, and participate in the decisions that affect our water future.

CWAG will review local water issues, discuss potential solutions, and answer your water questions on Saturday, Feb. 13 from 10 a.m. until noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation building, 882 Sunset Avenue (two blocks behind True Value Hardware). Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Please submit your questions and comments to info@cwagaz.org

Chris Hoy is president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group.

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