

Column: Water, politics and water politics

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By SANDRA HURLBUT, Special to Prescott Newspapers

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Most people think access to water is a God-given right, but that couldn't be further from the truth.

History is filled with legal precedents trying to resolve basic water rights; essentially sorting out the "haves versus the have nots." Even today, in water-scarce areas like South Africa and the Middle East, unstable governments are allowing private companies to provide water services. Unfortunately, many of these large corporations are callously controlling limited water resources making access to this life-giving substance an economic burden for the poor.

Here in Arizona, a new "land rush" has begun in rural areas with the express intent of gaining access to aquifers virtually unregulated by Arizona state water law. Farmers from drought-stricken areas of California, outside investors and even corporations from Saudi Arabia are purchasing large tracts of land in rural counties to grow water intensive crops, often for international export. Counties that have already been impacted include Mohave, Cochise and La Paz. Could Yavapai County be next?

The intentions behind these new land investments have provoked controversy. One of the better-known investors in property in Willcox (Cochise County) is Howard G. Buffett, son of billionaire Warren Buffet. He was quoted in a Jan. 27, 2016, Arizona Public Media article saying, "You don't buy land here. You buy water." Buffet's Arizona holdings include 4,400 acres in the Willcox area and he's leasing another 4,500 acres from the state for a family foundation engaged in agricultural research. He says they'll keep the research going unless they run out of water.

Tempers flared in Mohave County when a Modesto, California, nut company moved into the Kingman area, amassing more than 5,800 acres of land to grow pistachios, walnuts and almonds. A Jan. 21, 2016, Havasu News online article estimates a potential drawdown of 24,000 acre-feet of water annually – that's over 7.8 billion gallons a year!

What was troublesome to some Mohave County locals was the seemingly clandestine approach used to purchase the land. The company bought the land under three separate limited liability companies, including Mohave Valley University LLC, Valle Vista Environmental Studies LLC, and RB Ranch Development LLC; company names that hardly suggest large-scale farming operations.

In La Paz County, hackles have been raised by foreign entities buying land to export high-water-use crops, such as alfalfa, to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In a Jan. 15, 2016, CNBC.com article, Keith Murfield, CEO of Tempe-based United Dairywomen of Arizona, stated he believes the Saudi alfalfa shipments are basically "exporting water," because in Saudi Arabia, "they have decided that it's better to bring feed in rather than to empty their water reserves."

What's disconcerting to county officials in all three areas is this "water farming" phenomenon is entirely legal under Arizona state law. When Arizona established the once groundbreaking 1980 Groundwater Management Act, it established "Active Management Areas" (AMAs) in mostly urban areas (Prescott being one) and "Irrigation Non-Expansion Areas" (INAs) in three rural areas where overpumping was already a concern. The rest of the state was left to "reasonable and beneficial use" – which essentially means unlimited use.

County supervisors and municipal officials have limited authority to stop land investors from mining groundwater for crops. In the same CNBC.com article cited above, La Paz County Board of Supervisors Chairman Holly Irwin voiced strong opposition to this export practice noting, "It's very frustrating for me, especially when I have residents telling me that their wells are going dry and they have to dig a lot deeper for water." A similar situation has already occurred in the Pearce Sunsites area of Cochise County.

So what can our own county officials do about this situation?

Come find out when Yavapai County District 4 Supervisor Craig Brown and District 2 Supervisor Tom Thurman speak to the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) on Nov. 12. In a presentation titled "Yavapai County Government is Not in the Water

Business BUT...” Brown and Thurman will look at what local governments can and can’t do within the limitations of state statutes. The meeting takes place from 10 a.m. to noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation building, 882 Sunset in Prescott (two blocks behind True Value).

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

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