

Column: Water policy for new development a first step

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Submitted by the Citizen Water Advocacy Group

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Recently, the Prescott City Council amended its Water Management and Calendar Year 2017 Alternative Water Allocation Policy (www.prescott-az.gov/services/water/resources.php.) Among other changes, the policy allows greater housing density for certain new subdivisions if the new homes are constructed to meet the EPA WaterSense water conservation standards.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) supports water conservation for new development. However, because the WaterSense standards appear to have been developed for non-arid climates, they don't adequately emphasize the potential impact of conservation of water for landscaping purposes. While the City has initiated an important step in promoting greater water conservation for new construction, even more attention should be placed on supplementing WaterSense standards with additional standards that reflect Prescott's water situation.

The EPA WaterSense standards for indoor water use do require products that are highly efficient and readily available. Examples include more efficient dual-flush toilets, higher-efficiency clothes washers and lower-flow faucets and shower heads. These devices can yield major reductions in indoor water use.

Historically, 27 percent of Prescott's annual groundwater pumping is for residential landscapes. For our area, landscaping can account for half of summer water usage. It is clear that an active conservation program is needed to reduce the amount being pumped from our finite groundwater resource. Unfortunately, the WaterSense standards for landscape water use are inadequate and outdated. Here's why: WaterSense landscape rules apply only to the front yard and they allow turf and ornamental water features. Therefore, we believe that the City should consider supplementing WaterSense standards with additional measures that would focus on conservation of all landscaping water use.

For existing development, Prescott offers reasonable incentives for turf removal and rainwater harvesting systems, but there are no limits on landscape water use. Thus we are failing to take advantage of a significant opportunity to conserve groundwater.

To summarize:

Let's go beyond the WaterSense standards for landscaping purposes.

New houses are inhabited for decades. Let's make it mandatory for all new home construction to follow stronger water conservation standards.

For existing homes, let's phase in measures to limit landscape water use.

And, to give developers and new home buyers flexibility, let's make it possible for a homeowner to choose a landscape style: rocks, vegetable garden, turf, or xeriscape with the provision that any landscape water come from an appropriately sized rainwater harvesting system.

These recommendations would produce major benefits. City residents save money on outdoor watering. Our aquifer profits from reduced net groundwater pumping. Stress on the Verde River is reduced. The city can continue to grow while delaying expensive infrastructure — the Big Chino Water Ranch.

At CWAG's August 5 Prescott mayoral and council candidate forum, we will be asking candidates for their views about water conservation and a range of water management issues. Details about the forum can be found at www.cwagaz.org.

Citizen Water Advocacy Group members Gary Beverly, Gordon Bond, Leslie Hoy, Fred Oswald, George Sheats, Ed Wolfe, and John Zambrano contributed to this column.