

CWAG Bulletin #4



The Case for a Water Management District *A Solution to Protect Our Groundwater and the Verde River*

One solution can go a long way in solving our area's two major water problems. By establishing a water management district, we can attain our goals of reaching safe yield and also protecting the flows of the Verde River.

What are water districts? They are regional governmental authorities established by state legislation. Each district has its own set of rules – as agreed upon locally, not in Phoenix. Its governing board would be democratically determined probably by local election or appointing the county Board of Supervisors as the district board. State legislation may be written in a way that the district could only be established by an election of the district's voters.

Many people think that present state rules for the Prescott Active Management Area (AMA) will lead us to safe yield. Unfortunately, that is incorrect. Under state law, we cannot require all users to be responsible for their overdraft. And there is no effective enforcement of our safe yield goal. To achieve safe yield we need a district to accomplish essential tasks.

One essential task is to fairly divide up the total amount of groundwater we can safely pump each year, determining each party's share. That way each party will know how much they can safely pump; then they can alleviate their share of the overdraft.

All parties must be responsible for their share of our overdraft, including current and future "exempt" household well owners. If the overdraft is not eliminated, the water supply for the entire region is at risk– including those on individual wells.

A district could obtain alternative water for the overdraft share of smaller users such as private water companies and exempt well owners. Those users will have to pay a fee for the alternative water program. Residents in Prescott and Prescott Valley, under existing city plans, will have to pay to eliminate their overdraft. Shouldn't everyone be responsible in the same way? The only way to make this happen, and to provide effective enforcement mechanisms, is through state legislation.

To protect the Upper Verde, we need to maintain the underground flows from the Big Chino aquifer. New pumping in the Big Chino should be allowed only if there are mitigating inflows such as enhanced recharge or importation in that area. Many people are concerned about the effect of the proposed Big Chino pipeline on the Upper Verde. But the problem is much bigger than that. While development in the Big Chino is relatively small right now, if we don't get a management plan in place soon, large tracts of private land may be turned into residential developments pumping thousands of acre-feet of groundwater annually – at no charge.

Our groundwater and rivers are precious natural resources. Most citizens believe it is our duty to manage them responsibly for generations to come. Yet some people believe there is a private property right to pump water at no charge – even if the pumping isn't sustainable. Allowing anyone to pump as much as they want when the resource cannot support such a demand is a prescription for tragedy.

Unregulated pumping threatens to diminish the private property values of all of us. If we don't have sufficient water in the future or if it's too expensive then the alleged private property right to pump will ring hollow.

Some people believe that we need rapid population growth to maintain our quality of life and economy. Others believe it puts a strain on our quality of life and the sustainability of our economy. Whatever the effects, population growth without a lasting water supply will eventually result in social and economic hardships.

All the major local stakeholders – including representatives of all governmental jurisdictions as well as representative of the development industry and citizen water advocates – need to meet and to formulate a reasonable proposal to determine our own future. The best solution may well be a water management district encompassing at least our AMA and the Big Chino and possibly the Verde Valley. Realities in the state legislature mean this task will not be easy. But we have no time to waste, and we have no other choice but to try.

~ Those interested in learning more about local water issues and how our citizen based group is working with area officials are encouraged to visit our website at www.cwagAZ.org. Please join with us by attending our meeting held on the second Saturday of each month, 10am-Noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 882 Sunset Ave in Prescott.

CWAG ♦ PO Box 13145 ♦ Prescott, AZ 86304 (928) 445-4218 • info@cwagAZ.org