

Position: Big Chino Water Ranch Pipeline Project



PROTECT OUR WATER

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Summary:

CWAG has concluded that the Big Chino Water Ranch project should proceed only if key issues are resolved that assure a sustainable water future for the Prescott Active Management Area and protect the upper Verde River.

Water is fundamental to all life:

In recognition that water is fundamental to all life, the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) advocates a sustainable water future in the Upper Verde River Basin and the Prescott Active Management Area. A sustainable water future requires carefully managed uses that permit human society to flourish and endure into the indefinite future without degrading the ecological systems that depend on surface flows.

CWAG is vitally concerned with the viability of the Verde River because it is a remarkable wildlife habitat (hosting nineteen species protected by the Endangered Species Act), an important spiritual and cultural area for indigenous people, a historical perspective of ranching, a recreational resource for citizens, an economic engine for Yavapai County, and a vital water supply for Phoenix. The Verde River is the sole surviving living perennial river in Arizona. Groundwater from the Big Chino Valley supplies over 80% of the base flow of the 25-mile section between Paulden and Perkinsville; thus groundwater pumping from aquifers beneath the Big Chino Valley is a grave threat to the upper Verde River.¹



The proposed Big Chino Water Ranch (BCWR)², a joint project of the City of Prescott and the Town of Prescott Valley (COP/PV), includes a pipeline designed to transport up to 12,000 acre-feet per year of Big Chino groundwater into the Prescott Active Management Area. Many scientific studies by hydrologists and the United States Geological Survey have shown that groundwater exports from the Big Chino will

¹ For more info: https://cwagaz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=236&Itemid=406

² For more info: https://cwagaz.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=251&Itemid=669

remove water that would otherwise flow to the river, and that the base flow would be reduced by an amount equivalent to the quantity pumped.³

Before compromising the future of the Verde River and committing hundreds of millions of dollars of public funds in the Big Chino Pipeline project, the upper Verde River must be protected.

Based on extensive scientific studies, CWAG has concluded that the Big Chino Water Ranch project should not go forward unless the following key issues are resolved.

Key Issues:

Evaluate Alternative Sources – All possible alternative sources of water must be identified and rigorously analyzed. No prior studies have investigated the potential contribution of local solutions: managed growth, aggressive conservation, rainwater harvesting, and stormwater recharge. A combination of alternatives will be required. Before committing to build the BCWR, the City of Prescott and the Town of Prescott Valley must conduct a comprehensive analysis, with public participation, of the economic and ecological characteristics of all water resource alternatives, including importation, desalination, aggressive conservation, direct potable reuse, stormwater recharge, and rainwater harvesting. *The results of the alternative source study should be fully implemented before importing Big Chino groundwater – that should be the last alternative.*

Mitigation Plan – As part of a 2010 litigation settlement with the Salt River Project, the BCWR partners promised to mitigate⁴ any effects on base flow due to their pumping. A practical, scientifically valid, and fully funded mitigation plan must be in place in advance of pumping to prevent the upper Verde River from eventually suffering a debilitating loss of base flow.

To protect the current base flow of the upper Verde River, requirements for mitigation must include:

- 1) No diminution in base flow from project pumping.*
- 2) No degradation in water quality.*
- 3) Preservation of historical flood flows.*
- 4) Prior to any groundwater export, a mitigation plan must be approved by the Arizona Department of Water Resources using the best available science based on a ADWR approved groundwater model.*
- 5) The mitigation plan must include the timing, location, quality, quantity, and source of mitigation water.*
- 6) The mitigation plan must quantify the projected impacts to water quality and base flow measured at USGS Paulden stream gage # 09503700 near Paulden, AZ. No degradation of water quality is allowed.*
- 7) The mitigation plan must include proof of financial capability and commitment.*

To date no scientific mitigation plan has been published and no alternative water sources have been identified.

³ For more info see: <https://cwagaz.org/images/Reports/RefLib/Expert-PumpingGW-Verde.pdf>

⁴ “Mitigate” means replacing the volume of exported water by recharge of treated wastewater, or by retiring agricultural irrigation that has occurred within the recent five years in the big Chino sub-basin, or by recharge of other water sources such that the base flow and water quality are not degraded and natural flood flow cycles are maintained.

To protect the river, a realistic and fully funded mitigation plan must be designed into the project in advance of construction.

Voter Approval – In 2009 voters in Prescott approved, by a near two-thirds majority, Proposition 401 amending the Prescott City Charter to require voter approval of expensive infrastructure (such as the BCWR). Prescott’s share of the total BCWR costs will require Prescott voters to approve the BCWR project financing. *The Prescott City government must honor the will of the voters. Prescott Valley has no equivalent to Prop 401. CWAG suggests that Prescott Valley should adopt a similar requirement that Prescott Valley voters must approve expensive infrastructure.*

CONCLUSION:

There is no evidence that importing groundwater from the Big Chino Water Ranch is the optimal or sufficient alternative to assure a sustainable water supply, and substantial scientific study shows that unmitigated groundwater exports will threaten the upper Verde River.

The Big Chino Water Ranch project should be postponed until the issues and concerns listed above are resolved.

Approved by the CWAG Board, Aug 11, 2023