

Area facing hard choices for water future

By JOHN ZAMBRANO
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A Sept. 1 water summit at the Prescott Resort carried the title "Developing a Cooperative Strategy Toward Safe Yield."

"Safe yield" refers to a long-term balance between the water entering an aquifer through natural and artificial recharges and the water removed through pumping. Arizona does not require any portion of the groundwater flow to reach streams and maintain base flow.

The Prescott Active Management Area (AMA) has been out of safe yield for many years, a condition they call groundwater mining. State law mandates that the AMA cease groundwater mining by 2025, but the law is silent about how to divide the burden of achieving that goal among the communities and the extensive unincorporated areas comprising the AMA. Furthermore, the law does not provide penalties for not achieving safe yield.

Because no single community has an incentive to control its water usage unilaterally, it's been obvious for a long time that we need a cooperative strategy to achieve safe yield. Consequently, many of us welcomed news of a summit of elected officials from the major contributors to this unsafe pump-

ing condition together with representatives of the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR).

Unfortunately, this initial summit rates as a disappointment. The political representatives focused on excuses, primarily the well-known problem of exempt wells, and not on the important issues for which they have responsibility.

The latest ADWR annual hydrologic report for the Prescott AMA describes what it will take to achieve in general terms as follows: "The achievement of the AMA's safe yield goal would seem to require some combination of significant water conservation measures, the maximization of effluent reuse and recharge, the development of any additional renewable water supplies within the AMA, future water importation, and limitations on the growth of water demands in the AMA."

The report also cites the need for mitigation of the effects of future importation, which presumably refers to the adverse effect importation might have on the Verde River.

The communities in the AMA are making limited progress in all of the above areas except limitations on the growth of water demands.

At the summit, the representative from Dewey-Humboldt had to remind participants twice that controlling growth was necessary to meet safe yield. The panel seemed uninterested, and at least one called for greater development to minimize those bad exempt wells.

It is clear that failing to rein in the growth in demand increases the amount of water we would need (but may not be able) to import, and increases the stringency and unpleasantness of the conservation measures we will have to impose. No one discussed these realities and trade offs at the meeting.

A strategy to achieve safe yield must include a combination of individual water budgets for the main water users in the AMA and legislation to regulate exempt wells.

Regulation of exempt wells could include a requirement to modify conventional septic system designs to maximize recharge and treatment.

Users could establish individual water budgets by allocating to each provider a portion of the natural recharge. Each provider then would have the responsibility to recharge effluent and control demand to maintain a balance. While the allo-

cation methodology has significant implications, a fair way to allocate is on the basis of population at the time of ADWR's mining declaration in January 1999. That is when ADWR told communities they had been depleting our aquifer and would have to eliminate the imbalance.

Accordingly, individual water users should bear responsibility for their subsequent actions.

The summit concluded with participants offering their individual views regarding the consequences of not meeting safe yield.

One panelist said "none," referring to the absence of legal penalties. A cynic might have taken "none" to mean "none in my term of office."

The important fact is that mining by definition is not sustainable. The consequence, in the words of the City of Prescott's water consultant, is that a ghost town would result.

I hope future summits take place, but they need to get down to the concrete and painful decisions that each water user has to make to achieve safe yield.

(John Zambrano has lived in Prescott for five years. He is a retired environmental engineer and is active in local water and conservation organizations.)

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