

Beverly: Arizona water law destroys rivers

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Gary Beverly, PH.D., Special to the Courier

Arizona water laws fundamentally threaten the upper Verde River. There are no existing legal restrictions on groundwater pumping in the Big Chino aquifer, which supplies over 80 percent of the base flow of the upper Verde River.

This fall, voters have an opportunity to elect candidates who are familiar with water issues and will work towards modernizing water law.

Current law permits groundwater pumping to threaten Paulden domestic wells and the base flow of the Verde in four ways: expanded agricultural irrigation, groundwater exports such as Prescott's Big Chino Water Ranch pipeline project, increasing population, and the proposed Big Chino Valley Pumped Storage Project.

It is totally legal for agribusiness to irrigate with groundwater - without limit - in the Big Chino. Elsewhere in Arizona, Kingman and Wilcox are facing serious groundwater depletion as Big Ag from California's Central Valley has invaded Arizona to plant grapes, almonds, and alfalfa. Historically, Big Chino irrigation used 160 percent of the annual base flow of the upper Verde, which could happen again.

Water law permits Big Chino groundwater to be exported from fallowed farms and the Big Chino Water Ranch to support explosive growth. Over 16,000 new homes are slated for the Prescott Active Management Area despite a relentlessly growing overdraft that is depleting our groundwater reserves, decimating Del Rio Springs, draining wells in Williamson Valley and Chino Valley, and threatening the Verde River. The total legally authorized water export from the Big Chino is 1.6 rivers per year.

Water law, zoning, and development regulations all encourage population growth. If population in the Big Chino grows at 2 percent annually, it will reach 80,000 by 2110 to consume another 1.6 rivers per year.

Impacts from the proposed Big Chino Valley Pumped Storage Project are difficult to predict because planning is incomplete, but we know that river flow will be reduced unless mitigation is successful.

These estimates represent legally allowed likely future events. The combined effect of these four threats is that in 100 years Big Chino groundwater withdrawals may reach FIVE TIMES the current annual river flow, which would absolutely dry up the upper Verde. Every gallon of water removed from the Big Chino is one less gallon flowing in the Verde.

We can solve this problem. Water management is a political process, and local elected officials should be actively representing us to protect our groundwater and the Verde River.

Earlier this year, the Sustainable Water Workgroup (SWWG), a coalition of 31 Arizona conservation groups including the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG), proposed legislation to better protect our remaining perennial rivers. The bill had 21 co-sponsors but was denied a committee hearing. We will try again in 2019. The bill defines ecological water as a beneficial use, requires the Arizona Department of Water Resources to inventory ecological waters and describe their relationship to groundwater and surface water, and to report on how water management decisions impact rivers and springs.

SWWG will describe the Ecological Water proposal at CWAG's Oct. 13 meeting. Details are at www.cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly is president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.