

Talk of the Town: Legislators fail to protect our groundwater and rivers

GARY BEVERLY, PH.D Special to the Courier
Originally Published: August 6, 2022 8:16 p.m.

Our state legislators continue to fail to protect our water in our aquifers and rivers.

In the Prescott Active Management Area, groundwater pumping exceeds natural and artificial replenishment by over 18,000 acre-feet per year — imagine a football field three and a half miles deep. That overdraft relentlessly continues to grow, depleting our groundwater reserves, decimating Del Rio Springs and drying wells in Williamson Valley, Chino Valley and Coyote Springs. Although over 10,000 new homes are already approved for new water service, existing state law authorizes water for an additional 100,000 homes. The latest guidance from the Arizona Department of Water Resources fails to address this catastrophe in the making.

Arizona water law authorizes groundwater pumping for the Big Chino Water Ranch pipeline project, expanded agricultural irrigation and additional residential growth. Pumping in the Big Chino threatens Paulden domestic wells and the upper Verde River, which begins perennial flow near Paulden as groundwater from the Big Chino emerges at Verde Springs. In late June, we measured all-time record-low flows at Perkinsville Bridge.

Meanwhile, fiddling while our water disappears, our local representatives to the state legislature ignore our local problems and fail to provide solutions. In the last session, legislators from other rural areas introduced several helpful bills addressing rural water needs. Unfortunately, one state representative beholden to agricultural interests prevented any of these bills from being considered on the floor of the legislature.

The Colorado River water supply crisis spurred recent state water legislation, but the new law ignores the water problems in northern Arizona. Instead, it authorizes expensive and unrealistic augmentation projects such as multibillion dollar desalination plants and importing water from the Missouri River. Arizona water law continues to support drying the Verde River and draining our aquifers in the name of promoting growth.

If we want to have a sustainable water supply and a flowing river, local citizens and government need to step up with solutions.

First, we need regional cooperation to protect a shared water resource. There has been no regional water planning since the Yavapai County Supervisors discontinued

the Water Advisory Committee in 2014. Local governments must begin to meet regularly and plan solutions to protect our groundwater and the Verde River.

Solutions do exist. For example, a regional water conservation incentive program could reduce water use by rural wells and private water systems and improve existing weak conservation programs in Prescott Valley and Chino Valley. Also, a regional stormwater recovery and recharge program will reduce the overdraft.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) urges citizens to learn where candidates for the state house and senate stand on the critical issues facing our regional water supply and the Verde River. We encourage you to vote for those candidates who understand water issues and promise to work for solutions that help our area.

I will moderate via Zoom the Oct. 8 CWAG forum on water issues for LD 1 house and senate candidates. Also, former Gov. Bruce Babbitt will speak to CWAG via Zoom on Aug. 13. Details at cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly is a member of the CWAG Executive Committee and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.