

Talk of the Town: State government tells rural residents to dry up

By GARY BEVERLY

Ignoring a thousand-year drought, a shrinking Colorado River, a groundwater “overdraft” and a land-rush building boom in our desert state, the Arizona Legislature has failed — in fact refused — to manage rural Arizona’s water supply.

In Wilcox and Douglas, enormous agricultural pumping operations have caused municipal and domestic wells to fail. Douglas voters approved a new Active Management Area (AMA), but the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) draft management plan is extremely weak. Governor Katie Hobbs decreed a new AMA in Wilcox, but no management plan has been released.

In Mohave County, massive Big Ag pumping caused ADWR to declare an Irrigation Non-expansion Area, which is not a solution because it prevents only a bad situation from becoming worse.

In a famous case near Yuma and Parker, Arizona’s amazingly loose water laws permitted a foreign corporation to lease farmland and use a massive amount of groundwater to grow alfalfa for export to their home country where the crop is illegal because it uses so much water. The governor has intervened in the case, but the situation is not solved.

These few examples have received inadequate attention, and there are many other rural areas that have been overlooked — including our area. The Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA) is the worst performing AMA in the state. Although ADWR released three inadequate management plans, the overdraft (pumping that exceeds recharge) continues to grow; we are moving further from the goal of Safe Yield. ADWR hasn’t published current groundwater data since 2019 (!) when 71% of our groundwater pumping was overdraft. Del Rio Springs, the historical headwaters of the Verde River, is effectively dry and domestic wells on the edges of our aquifer are failing, including many along Williamson Valley Road.

In 1993, the Legislature designated the Big Chino aquifer and the Verde River as a sacrifice zone by creating an exception to water law that permits the cities in the PrAMA to export groundwater from the Big Chino sub-basin — enough to dry up the upper Verde River twice over — with zero concern for the environmental impacts. This is the legal authority for the controversial Big Chino pipeline project. I estimate that the Legislature has legally authorized enough paper water to grow the PrAMA's population to over 350,000.

The Legislature's actions reveal their intent: to facilitate development and protect Big Ag, not to sustainably manage our water. As in previous sessions, this year dozens of good water bills were introduced and denied a committee hearing — killing the bills — by Rep. Gail Griffin, R-Hereford, our de facto water czar.

Griffin received 31,444 votes in Cochise County, yet as chair of the House Natural Resources Committee, she controls water policy for 8 million Arizonans. Cochise Regional News reports that “Griffin has played grim reaper to every piece of legislation meant to protect local water resources for the communities dependent on them — the Hereford lawmaker has received substantial campaign finance support from political action committees (PACs) associated with real estate developers and industrial agricultural interests seeking to exploit the state's water supply.”

Done right, rural water management is a good idea. With ADWR oversight, local folks will be better than the state at fine-tuning water management suited to local priorities. Last year, the Legislature considered authorizing rural areas outside of AMAs to manage their groundwater. After Griffin blocked a good bill, in a cynical attempt to prevent rural management she forced SB1221 through the Legislature — only to be vetoed by Hobbs. This year, after killing a reasonable bipartisan bill, the same interests are pushing the unacceptable SB1520. Hopefully Hobbs will veto that one, too.

Current Arizona water law and ADWR won't help us; our state representatives and senator have not yet stepped up to help us. Citizens in Yavapai County need to help themselves, and that is the subject of my next column.

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