

Beverly: Water for development often only on paper

 [dcourier.com/news/2018/nov/09/beverly-water-development-often-only-paper](https://www.dcourier.com/news/2018/nov/09/beverly-water-development-often-only-paper)

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

Annexation applications by the Deep Well Ranch and Arizona Eco developments have awakened public concern about growth. Area residents ask CWAG (Citizens Water Advocacy Group), “Where does the water come from?”

The answer: Arizona water law exists to serve water to development, despite posturing about a sustainable water supply. This is a prime concern for CWAG, a local science-based organization pursuing a sustainable water future and protection of the upper Verde River.

In the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA), groundwater pumping exceeds natural and artificial replenishment by over 15,000 acre-feet per year (afy) — imagine a football field flooded to a depth of three miles. And the overdraft is relentlessly growing, depleting our groundwater reserves, decimating Del Rio Springs, drying wells in Williamson Valley and Chino Valley, and threatening the Verde River.

Regardless, Arizona water law permits explosive growth. Over 16,000 new homes are slated for approval in the PrAMA, fed by paper water. Despite the swelling overdraft, this madness is legal, sustained by loopholes and exceptions. Some examples follow.

The Great Plat Rush: In 1998, the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) declared the PrAMA to be in overdraft, initiating a cap on groundwater pumping and requiring that new subdivisions must prove a 100-year water supply. Prescott Valley objected, delaying the new rules. In 1999, the objection was overruled but meanwhile 32,000 new lots were created, dodging the new rules and committing one-third of the total PrAMA groundwater stored in the aquifer. This evasion creates over half of our unsustainable overdraft. Thousands of these unbuilt lots remain, legally supplied by groundwater.

Extinguishment credits: Although groundwater use in the PrAMA is capped, farmers holding an Irrigation Grandfathered Right can permanently fallow their land and convert the right into extinguishment credits. Extinguishment credits, now enough for over 6,000 new homes, can be purchased and used to prove a 100-year water supply anywhere within the PrAMA.

Renewable water: Both Prescott and Prescott Valley recharge their treated wastewater. ADWR rules permit cities to immediately increase groundwater pumping for new development, even though the recharged water may not reach the aquifer for a century. This is the only water source for development in Prescott Valley, and a significant source for Prescott. Prescott also recharges some surface water from Granite Creek.

Imported water: Generally, cities in active management areas cannot import groundwater, but Prescott has a legal exception, the Big Chino Water Ranch. Both Prescott and Prescott Valley have committed this water to growth. Unmitigated water importation from the Big Chino will degrade the upper Verde River and threaten Paulden wells.

Although new developments have legal paper water supplies, all additional consumptive water use increases the overdraft and endangers the Verde River. To ensure water for our future, we must conserve and work to modernize Arizona water law.

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