

Water conservation – it's time to ask questions

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Picture going to the local football field and looking up at a column of water three and a half miles high. That column contains 5 billion gallons, and is the volume of water our aquifer is losing each year, according to the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR).

This loss, or overdraft, results when more water is pumped from the aquifer than is replenished by precipitation and artificial recharge.

ADWR also says that, unless things change dramatically, we can have no expectation that this annual reduction in our water supply will stop. Furthermore, with climate change, ADWR is predicting a “hotter, drier future,” which, along with growth, will further increase the stress on our aquifer, our only supply of groundwater.

ADWR acknowledges this challenge and is requiring a renewed priority on conservation efforts by Prescott and Prescott Valley, the two largest water providers in our region. Each is contributing about a billion and a half gallons a year to the overdraft. How do we know this? Each year, municipalities provide ADWR with the exact volume of water they pump which, when offset by the volume of wastewater they recharge, calculates their contribution to our region's overdraft.

If ADWR's goal for water-conservation efforts is to reduce the regional overdraft, then the goal for conservation programs for Prescott and Prescott Valley should be to reduce their contributions to this overdraft. ADWR should have confidence that Prescott and Prescott Valley can set measurable objectives, such as a 10% reduction in residential water use in five years, and design conservation programs to achieve their objectives.

Unfortunately, ADWR has not kept things simple with its conservation requirements. With one option they have assigned a point value to each possible conservation measure and the municipality must implement

measures totaling at least 10 points for four different measures. With another option, only a 1% reduction in water use is required. Neither of these options will achieve as large a reduction in the overdraft as is needed to protect our water supply.

Nevertheless, Prescott and Prescott Valley need to be planning sizable increases in the scope and budgets for their conservation efforts. While Prescott Valley has less conservation experience, Prescott can build on its familiarity with increasing water rates for higher usage levels and a modest incentives program.

Citizens need to ask their elected officials three questions to ensure that conservation efforts will be directed toward meaningful objectives:

1 - What is your city or town's current annual contribution to our region's multi-billion gallon overdraft?

2 - What is your prediction of the increase in your city or town's contribution to the overdraft that will come from climate change and growth?

3 - Most importantly, what is your five-year objective for conservation programs to reduce your city or town's water use?

These are not easy questions for elected officials to answer. But answers are needed to make sure that conservation efforts will successfully reduce Prescott and Prescott Valley's contribution to our regional overdraft.

Former Gov. Bruce Babbitt will speak to the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) on Aug. 13. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Gordon Bond is a retired business consultant and former chair of CWAG's Education/Outreach Committee.