

# The Daily Courier

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## • Talk of the Town

*Water should be treated with caution*

By JOHN ZAMBRANO Special to the Courier

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The water supply for residents of the Prescott area is the Prescott Active Management Area aquifer system. It has carried that name since January 1999 when the Department of Water Resources officially determined the AMA was "out-of-safe yield."

That means the water level in the aquifer is declining, because water users are taking more water out than they are putting back in, or recharging naturally and artificially. Simply put, we are "mining" the aquifer.

By law, the AMA must achieve safe yield by 2025. Aside from the legal requirement, it should be obvious that mining cannot continue indefinitely; at some point the water will not be economically or physically available.

A combination of methods can eliminate the mining of groundwater: Water conservation can reduce demand; residents can collect and recharge wastewater to the aquifer; we can import water from sources outside the aquifer; and finally, we could curtail demand for water with policies that limit growth.

Of all the methods, limiting population growth has met with great resistance from many public officials throughout the region. One can recall the great rush to approve 32,000 plats in 1998, after the groundwater mining declaration came out and before it took effect. This view that the current rapid growth is essential to the region's economic health is short sighted. It's impossible to sustain such growth. Moreover, limiting population growth does not mean that you cannot grow the economy. However, as long as our public officials view rapid population growth as essential, the remaining methods must play a greater role in achieving safe yield.

The amount of effluent is limited. Importing water has legal, financial, environmental and political implications. Most notably, importation from the Big Chino aquifer will take water from the Verde River. Our communities have pledged to avoid this effect, but they have not put forth a plan to prevent it. Thus, conservation must play a significant role in achieving safe yield.

Where we use water is a key to conservation. Water used for watering vegetation goes into to the atmosphere. We can return water we use in the home to the aquifer. Municipalities that have central collection systems for treatment and recharge do this efficiently. It is less efficient in communities that use septic tanks with leach fields. While conservation of all uses is

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valuable, the greatest benefits will come from outdoor uses.

Everyone tells us to conserve water, but our ability or will to do so varies. If we are to conserve significantly and fairly, we need proper incentives.

We can use less water outdoors if we minimize landscape vegetation, by using only native plants and clearing the excessive trees and shrubs on our properties.

Achieving substantial reductions in water use would require steeply tiered pricing, as well as ordinances for allowable plants and watering.

We can establish codes for new construction that limit the amount and type of vegetation. The idea already is meeting resistance from developers and landscapers. Furthermore, by not including existing users, its applicability and fairness has limits. It will be a challenge to establish vegetation ordinances.

The way we charge for water can spur conservation. The price can be inexpensive for the quantity that a typical family uses inside the home for essential health and sanitation. However, the price beyond that essential quantity would have to increase dramatically if we are to reduce demand. Some communities have such tiered price structures, but the prices at the high levels are still modest and insufficient to obtain the kind of water use reductions we need.

Stringent water conservation measures may be unpleasant and unacceptable for some of our residents. However, achieving safe yield is essential. Our communities need to design a conservation plan that will reduce outdoor water use substantially to counter the expected growth in demand that they are encouraging.

(John Zambrano is a retired environmental engineer, resident of Prescott and member of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group.)

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