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Talk of the Town

Column: Water misconceptions pose challenges

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"There's no point in conserving water when the water saved just goes to population growth."

"It's not right for water rates to go up if we conserve."

"Arizona law requires us to reach safe yield, and the state has a plan in place to balance our aquifer and preserve our water supply."

We often hear comments like the above. They indicate misconceptions that present a significant challenge to achieving a sustainable water supply in our region.

A recent survey asked Chino Valley residents whether they agreed with the statement, "If I conserve water it will only benefit new growth and development." About 42 percent of the respondents agreed. The fact is, they, and other residents of the Prescott Active Management Area (AMA) who hold the same belief, are incorrect.

Almost all of the water used in our region comes from groundwater in the AMA. New subdivisions in the AMA are prohibited from using AMA groundwater and must rely on some "alternative" water source. Therefore, if you reduce your water use, the municipalities cannot use the water you save to build new subdivisions. Your water provider will be able to pump less, thereby reducing our large overdraft.

Population growth can occur in our AMA without new sources of water by building on previously approved lots and by adding new domestic wells. This growth is not dependent on conserved water.

A second misconception is that water providers should not increase rates when there is large-scale conservation. The fact is, when there is a great reduction in water use, the provider's costs and revenue will both decrease. The costs, however, will not decrease as much because of certain fixed costs, such as administration and interest. The average rate for a gallon of water therefore has to increase somewhat because of the fixed costs.

The effect, however, is that those who conserved the most will have a reduced water bill and those who did not will see an increased bill. Conservation pays.

Certainly many factors can result in increased water rates, including the need for new or improved equipment and inflation. Most importantly, no matter what the water rate is, the lower your water

use the lower your bill will be.

Another misconception is that state and local jurisdictions have a plan to reach safe yield by 2025 and thereby stabilize our aquifer. Actually, there is no plan to reach safe yield. The state established in law the goal for the AMA to reach safe yield by 2025, but it didn't provide for any penalties or any process by which to achieve safe yield.

Committees composed of local jurisdictions and other stakeholders have made two attempts in the past six years to investigate safe yield issues. In each case the jurisdictions have rejected the suggested possible tools, solutions and calls for further research. Currently, local jurisdictions are not even discussing how to develop a plan to reach safe yield.

The above three misconceptions create challenges for our conservation efforts. Some people are opposed to population growth, and as a result of their mistaken belief that conservation will cause more residential construction, are resistant to conserving. In addition, the belief that it's wrong for water providers to increase rates as a result of conservation can cause undue opposition to reasonable conservation programs. And if residents realize that local jurisdictions aren't working to achieve safe yield, they may wonder what purpose their conservation is serving, and their motivation to conserve could diminish.

It's difficult for individuals to form new water-saving habits and for governments to develop forward-thinking public water policies. It's even harder if we have misconceptions about the issues. If our governments intend to comply with the law and stabilize our aquifer by reaching safe yield, they should be straightforward about the costs and benefits, and they should demonstrate through their own policies the importance of reaching safe yield and achieving a sustainable water supply.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) will host a forum for Prescott council and mayoral candidates from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday, Aug. 13, at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 882 Sunset in Prescott (two blocks behind True Value). The forum will focus on water and related issues. All eight candidates will participate and will be available to chat with the public before and after the forum. For more information, call 445-4218, visit www.cwagAZ.org, or submit comments or questions to info@cwagaz.org.

Howard Mechanic is chair of the Public Policy Committee of Citizens Water Advocacy Group.

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