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Talk of the Town: 'Safe yield' water use remains elusive

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It has been 13 years since the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) officially declared the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA) to be out of safe yield. That declaration in January 1999 confirmed that more water was being withdrawn than was entering the aquifer and that water levels had been declining for some time. Arizona set a goal of the year 2025 for attaining safe yield.

This overdraft, which is referred to as groundwater "mining," has been increasing for some time. We collectively withdraw about 18,000 acre-feet per year, which is more than four times the safe yield quantity of 4,000 acre-feet per year determined by ADWR.

Continuing to mine groundwater will create serious problems for residents of the PrAMA. Some wells in the shallow parts of the aquifer already have gone dry and more will continue to do so as the water table drops. Del Rio Springs, a landmark feature in the history of this region, is projected by ADWR to go dry by 2025, a mere 13 years from now. Ground subsidence has not been detected in this region, but as the water table drops, the potential for the ground surface to drop becomes greater, with damage to structures as a consequence.

So why don't we have a plan to eliminate the overdraft and achieve safe yield? Importantly, the state set safe yield as only a goal. There are no regulatory penalties or programs to achieve safe yield. The water providers must do it, and developing a plan will not be easy. With our common aquifers, no provider by itself can develop a plan. The providers must work together with clear commitments and this can be a challenge. The communities will have to make some tough decisions and allocate significant funds to study and develop new sources of water and construct the required infrastructure.

While some wells in the shallow parts of the aquifer have gone dry, the large providers, Prescott and Prescott Valley, have locations in the aquifer such that the taps in those communities won't go dry in the short term. As for the looming loss of historic Del Rio Springs and its riparian habitat, sadly, we don't hear public officials expressing concern.

Although the circumstances we have described are difficult, they don't provide an excuse. While we delay, more wells go dry, surface waters diminish and the costs to solve the problem likely will increase.

Since the declaration of groundwater mining, there have been two cooperative efforts to study safe

yield, and while water managers did not attempt to develop a plan, their efforts resulted in important recommendations. The recommendations, however, were rejected by the region's elected officials, and the reports are sitting on the proverbial shelf.

A new possibility for action that can move us toward safe yield is just getting under way. Every 10 years, ADWR issues a Management Plan for each AMA in the state. While they are already years late in issuing this Fourth Management Plan (4MP), ADWR has begun preparation and has conducted public discussions about possible content.

Although these Management Plans are not pathways to achieve safe yield, they have included useful information and some conservation requirements. In a meeting this year, in apparent recognition of the approaching 2025 safe yield goal, ADWR stated that the 4MP needs to be "more of a plan" to meet safe yield.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) will monitor and contribute to the development of the 4MP. We have provided detailed suggestions for the content, and in the hope that ADWR will go further this time, we have asked ADWR to use the 4MP to encourage the jurisdictions to develop a joint safe yield plan.

The 4MP process will gather steam as ADWR issues its first draft and holds more public meetings. Members of the public can attend and express their views and concerns in speech or writing. You can be added to an email notification list from ADWR or can learn of meetings by subscribing to CWAG's email notifications or visiting our website: www.cwagaz.org.

It likely will take a visible and vocal public to motivate public officials to do what is needed to provide a long-term water supply, protect riparian areas and protect the livability and economic vitality of our region. We hope you take an interest and express your concerns.

Please submit your comments and questions to info@cwagaz.org.

CWAG invites you to participate in an open forum on local and regional water issues on July 14. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

John Zambrano is president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and a retired environmental engineer.

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