

Need for Big Chino water not urgent

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Many people assume we need Big Chino water soon -- both to continue Prescott's growth and to reach Safe Yield. However, it's now clear this assumption is incorrect. The facts are we won't need to implement Safe Yield until 2025, even though we need to develop a plan relatively soon. Also it won't be until 2025 when we will need Big Chino water for new homes.

In the last ten years, since the area was declared out of Safe Yield, Prescott's City Councils have allocated 200 acre-feet per year for new development. This amount of water has been enough to satisfy the new demand, and there usually has been some water left unallocated at the end of each year.

Prescott currently has about 3200 acre-feet of water in its assured water supply portfolio. That's enough for 16 years' water allocations. Of that *1296 acre-feet would provide enough water*

to build homes on all remaining non-watered lots within our city limits at existing densities.

Home construction has dropped considerably, and is expected to remain below projections for at least a few years (many experts say it will take at least five years to return to “normal”). However, all of the computations used above are based on the “normal” yearly water allocations. Since we now expect reductions in demand, we can add several years to the date our available water supply will last. Times have changed. We need to consider whether our previously-planned schedule for Big Chino water needs to be changed.

There are other alternatives to the Big Chino Pipeline to extend our water supply. One is enhanced water conservation measures for new development, such as being discussed in Chino Valley that will double the number of new homes that can be built with available water. Another is using or recharging more rainfall.

CWAG believes these and other options should be considered as alternatives to the Big Chino pipeline. The pipeline has been termed a

“bridge” to get Prescott and Prescott Valley to a long-term sustainable water supply. Such a supply (possibly from the Colorado River, as is now being considered by a Bureau of Reclamation study) will not be available soon. But if we can get to 2025 without Big Chino water, then we may be able to skip the Big Chino “bridge” and go directly to a sustainable long-term supply.

We should not ignore our responsibility to reach Safe Yield by 2025. The Reasonable Growth Initiative, passed in 2005, requires all effluent from large annexed developments to go to Safe Yield. We should also apply all water saved through conservation to Safe Yield. We have 17 years to implement other components of a Safe Yield plan.

According to a Central Arizona Partnership report, Prescott Valley has enough water to grow until 2031. Considering the growth capability of both communities and the financial, legal and environmental issues, CWAG believes it would be prudent to resolve these issues before committing to the pipeline project. Specifically, the communities would have time to complete a Habitat Conservation Plan, which

would resolve the legal and environmental challenges.

The above analysis shows that water from the Big Chino may not be needed until 2025 and possibly not at all. We need to move cautiously and prudently, and seriously consider other alternatives first.