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Column: Time for a regional water district?

By CHRIS HOY
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In 1999, the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) established the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA) because test wells had produced data demonstrating that the Little Chino aquifer was being overdrafted, a condition that prompted the state to impose mandatory groundwater use restrictions.

The PrAMA - which includes Prescott, Prescott Valley, Chino Valley, Dewey-Humboldt and parts of Yavapai County - now has specific controls over groundwater allocated to future development and a requirement that the affected communities adopt new water conservation guidelines. All communities in the PrAMA rely on groundwater from the Little Chino aquifer except the Dewey-Humboldt area, which gets its water from the Upper Agua Fria.

The top management goal for the PrAMA is safe yield by 2025. Safe yield, in simple terms, is defined as a balance between water withdrawn and water recharged into the aquifer.

Our elected officials have not yet come to a consensus on the most efficient and affordable way to achieve safe yield in the Little Chino aquifer while, at the same time, protecting the Upper Verde River.

Is it possible that competing economic priorities and disagreements about the most effective water management strategies have created a situation in which PrAMA decision-makers simply cannot agree on a unified plan for reaching safe yield and creating long-term water sustainability?

Yes, it is possible that the decision-making structure ADWR has tasked with solving our regional water problems cannot - for a multitude of reasons, both practical and political - get the job done.

Could a regional water district do what the PrAMA communities apparently cannot do? Or is a water district just another layer of government with its own political, structural and legal decision-making limitations?

According to an article by Grant Schulte of the Associated Press (July 26, 2015), one state that has had notable success using water districts to manage groundwater is Nebraska. The Cornhusker State, which sits atop the Ogallala Aquifer, irrigates nearly 8.3 million acres statewide or 15 percent of the national total.

"Despite its widespread use for crop irrigation, Nebraska's groundwater supply has remained stable, while states such as California and Texas struggle with shortages," wrote Mr. Schulte. As a result, Nebraska has had inquiries about the way their districts function from Florida, Indiana, Oklahoma and Utah, and has given explanatory presentations in Kansas and South Dakota. Nebraska water district officials have also been asked to speak at a western states conference in California in August.

I called Karina Schoengold, an associate professor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Department of Agricultural Economics and School of Natural Resources, to ask her why Nebraska's twenty-three water districts were so successful in managing groundwater.

She explained that, compared to other states, Nebraska has delegated an unusual amount of groundwater-management authority to its locally elected district boards. "The districts have taxing authority," she said, "and are organized by river basin, not political boundaries. There's a greater vested interest in managing the resource if it's your neighbor that is affected if you are using too much water."

Schoengold added that not all twenty-three districts are equally successful. In the end, this is about the caliber of the people who are elected to serve on the water

district's board of directors.

That's a risk and one of the main reasons a water district has not been seriously proposed for our region. The success or failure of such a district will depend entirely on who serves on its board and what motivated them to serve.

Although there is no guarantee that a regional water district would do a better job of securing our water future than the stakeholder communities in the PrAMA, the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) believes the concept deserves a thorough investigation. Taking a thorough look at what Nebraska has accomplished would be a good place to start.

At the CWAG candidate forum on August 1, I asked the candidates if a regional water district was an idea they would consider exploring and they all said, "yes."

Let's all encourage the newly elected officials to follow through with that commitment. A competent and properly motivated regional water district, to include the Verde Valley, could be the best way to achieve safe yield in the Little Chino aquifer and also protect the Verde River from excessive groundwater pumping in the Big Chino aquifer.

City of Prescott Watershed Smart Coordinator Amanda Richardson, presents "Water Smart Landscapes: Using less, Preventing Runoff, Preserving Beauty" on Sept. 12. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Chris Hoy is president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group.

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