

Column: April is Water Awareness Month

By CHRIS HOY, Special to the Courier

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The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) would like to dedicate this month's column to a short list of current and important regional water issues to make sure we are all aware of the challenges and choices ahead, as well as the opportunities for citizen advocacy and action.

It's clear that we need a sustainable water management plan that will ensure a stable water supply for generations to come without causing environmental, economic or social damage. The Little Chino aquifer, which supplies water to Chino Valley, Prescott and Prescott Valley, has declined for years. The Arizona Department of Water Resources has asked the stakeholder communities to correct that problem, and achieve "safe yield" by 2025, but the communities have not yet agreed to a plan that would end the decline. The solutions that have been proposed so far, by both the stakeholders and the state, would not satisfy the above definition of a sustainable water management plan because they are too narrowly focused on simply augmenting the local water supply.

A modern, forward-looking water management plan will avoid unacceptable consequences (growing numbers of dry wells on the western edge of the Little Chino aquifer, the forecasted loss of Del Rio Springs, historical damage to the Salt, San Pedro, Santa Cruz and Colorado rivers, and future reductions in the baseflow of the upper Verde River) that could result if we refuse to learn from past experience. Citizens can participate in the search for the best possible answer to this problem by attending public meetings and communicating with elected officials.

The Big Chino Pipeline project, intended to bring about 12,000 acre-feet of groundwater annually into the Prescott and Prescott Valley communities, is now the subject of a multiyear study by the Salt River Project (SRP), Prescott and Prescott Valley (12,000 acre-feet/year at 0.35 acre-feet per single family residence, enough for 34,286 homes using four billion gallons of water annually). The purpose of the study is to determine if pumping that much groundwater from the Big Chino aquifer (which supplies 80-86 percent of the upper Verde River's baseflow) would eventually result in a reduction in that baseflow. SRP, tribes and Verde Valley irrigators have long-standing Verde River surface water rights. CWAG has determined the study will predict that, over time, baseflow will be reduced by groundwater pumping. Prescott and Prescott Valley have promised to mitigate the effects of their pumping, which would protect the river if they decided to proceed with the pipeline. However, a mitigation plan has not yet been designed. The cost of the pipeline, without a mitigation plan, is uncertain, but estimates range from \$170M to over \$300M. Proposition 401, approved by voters in 2009, gives Prescott citizens the right to vote on the Big Chino pipeline project.

Prescott's usage data show that about 27 percent of our annual groundwater pumping is applied to landscapes. This water cannot be recovered and reused. Recently Prescott annexed 1625 acres of Deep Well Ranch land and, because the city has no meaningful controls on landscape water use, a large amount of groundwater could be lost when new subdivisions are constructed on that acreage.

CWAG has written to the City of Prescott Community Development Department expressing our concern about the lack of landscape ordinances for new construction. Appropriate ordinances could greatly reduce the use of groundwater for irrigating residential and commercial landscaping. Citizens can and should insist that the city adopt ordinances now that will prevent unnecessary groundwater loss.

Conservation is the least expensive and fastest way to protect our limited water supply. Examples include: landscaping with drought tolerant plants; rainwater harvesting; collecting runoff from impervious surfaces (roads, parking lots) to be used for recharge; and reuse of effluent. Learn more about these conservation strategies at prescottwatersmart.com and waterawarenessmonth.com.

Current conservation programs in the Prescott region include tiered water rates, some monetary incentives and voluntary efforts supported by public information programs. These are useful programs, but far from adequate. Citizens should encourage the City of Prescott to institute more effective water conservation policies now.

CWAG encourages citizens to get involved by practicing personal conservation and by helping their community leaders to create a sustainable water management plan.

Landscape architect T. Barnabas Kane will show you everything you need to know about rainwater harvesting on Saturday, Apr. 9 from 10 a.m. to noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation building, 882 Sunset Avenue. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Submit your questions and comments to info@cwagaz.org.

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