

## Talk of the Town: Groundwater regulation: The next big thing

Chris Hoy, Special to Prescott Newspapers

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There is a clear and urgent need for new groundwater regulations in rural Arizona.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) currently has only two “tools” available to help it manage groundwater pumping: AMAs (Active Management Areas) and INAs (Irrigation Non-Expansion Areas). AMAs prohibit pumping groundwater in support of new development. INAs prohibit increasing irrigated acres using groundwater. ADWR authority is essentially limited to the area within five AMAs, covering just 13 percent of the state, and three small INAs.

Because 87 percent of Arizona’s land area is not managed by the Arizona Groundwater Management Act, groundwater in unregulated aquifers (including the Big Chino) can be pumped by landowners subject to only two simple criteria: the water must be for “beneficial and reasonable use.”

Recently state officials have talked with concerned citizens in three rural areas about the consequences of weak groundwater regulation:

- Steadily declining water tables
- Private wells going dry
- Land subsidence (sinking of land)

Although never discussed, but also critically important, are the inevitable negative impacts of unregulated groundwater pumping on environmental water: springs, rivers and wildlife habitat.

Governor Doug Ducey recently established the Water Augmentation Council and directed it to address rural water issues in 22 regions. So far, ADWR listening sessions have revealed:

Farmers in Wenden, Aguila and the Salome areas are concerned about the effects of the significant depletion of groundwater caused by decades of crop irrigation.

Citizens in Kingman fear the consequences of unlimited groundwater pumping by large, out-of-state agricultural corporations that have recently shown up. Some were shocked that ADWR had no authority to regulate groundwater in their area, but others asserted that unregulated groundwater problems cannot be solved by AMAs or INAs. One-hundred-twenty citizens, including many public officials, expressed strong resistance to new regulations but wanted ADWR to somehow protect their groundwater from new agribusiness.

One worried Kingman resident said: “ADWR is going to have to come into our community and create an immediate AMA.” Representative Regina Cobb, R-LD5, said she is neither an INA or AMA person and wants a third option created.

Native Arizona growers in Willcox also fear that groundwater pumping by new agribusiness will destroy their local economy. Willcox residents joined with ADWR in 2015 to propose a third option: a new regulatory tool called a Groundwater Conservation Area (GCA). Residents claimed the GCA would minimize mining of their aquifer but would still permit reasonable economic expansion by increasing water conservation, with minor changes to the regulatory footprint. However, the 2016 Legislature refused to approve the GCA.

A significant obstacle to creating a “third option” that will be acceptable to the state Legislature may be the often expressed desire of current residents to regulate only new sources of groundwater pumping.

The proposed Big Chino Water Ranch pipeline project will present a threat to the base flow of the Upper Verde River unless Prescott and Prescott Valley keep their promise to mitigate the effects of groundwater pumping. Also, agribusiness could legally move into the Big Chino, similar to the invasion of Kingman and Willcox. And a massive electric pumped storage utility is already planned.

One certain threat is future growth and development in the Big Chino Valley. At a June 2016 public meeting hosted by the Verde River Basin Partnership, Steve Mauk, director of Development Services for Yavapai County, revealed data showing strong growth in the Big Chino. Mauk believes the growth trend will continue and he pointed out that when developers in the Prescott AMA can no longer demonstrate a 100-year Assured Water Supply, they might instead develop in the unregulated Big Chino Basin.

For the above reasons and more, we need new state groundwater regulations designed to control pumping in non-AMA/INA regions in order to stabilize declining water tables and protect environmental water resources.

One way citizens can calculate the odds that we will someday see new rural groundwater regulations is to attend the Saturday, Aug. 6, Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) candidate forum, from 9:30 a.m. to noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation building, 882 Sunset Ave. in Prescott.

Eleven candidates will be on stage (five running for the state Legislature and six for county supervisor seats) discussing questions about water issues sent to them in advance by CWAG. The questions focus on groundwater management outside AMAs, the need for increased regulation, mandatory water conservation, the need to protect the base flow of the Upper Verde River, and more. Read the forum questions at [www.cwagaz.org](http://www.cwagaz.org).

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