

CWAG: Population growth versus water

Talk of the Town

GARY BEVERLY, Special to the Courier
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Concerned about growth? What about all the new houses? We (the Citizens Water Advocacy Group, or CWAG) are often asked about growth and its impact on water.

Growth and water consumption are connected because every new home consumes groundwater. Yet, CWAG is not a “no growth” group. We count gallons, not heads.

Growth is inevitable and there is no legal or practical way to stop it. However, growth can be managed and regulated by local zoning and city policies. Many citizens hope and believe that water resources can be used to limit growth, but that is not the case.

In the long run, enormous growth has been baked into the system by the Arizona Legislature, which has created numerous loopholes and exceptions in water law, all intended to facilitate growth. For example, in the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA), there is now enough legally authorized water (“paper water” that is not sustainably available) to more than double the current AMA population despite a large and growing overdraft in the PrAMA, the worst performing AMA in the state.

The first thing you do when you’ve dug yourself into a hole is to stop digging. So how about designing those new subdivisions so they do not consume groundwater? CWAG calculates that this is easily possible, even with the scant rainfall in our area, and the Watershed Management Group in Tucson agrees. We call it Water Neutral Development (WND).

To create a WND subdivision:

- **All homes must be connected** to municipal sewer, and the treated wastewater (about 80% of the water used inside homes) is recharged to restore the aquifer, not to benefit additional new homes.
- **Landscape water use must be strictly** controlled and reduced. Currently, roughly one-third of our total water use is evaporated on landscapes and cannot be recharged.
- **Subdivisions are designed to collect** stormwater from roofs, driveways, streets, etc. and directed to aquifer recharge before the water evaporates.

This is a win-win concept that has not been tried in our region. We need a demonstration project that monitors, measures and evaluates actual performance.

CWAG pitched the WND concept to the Fain Signature Group and Brown Homes, the developers of the proposed Lakeshore 650 subdivision on the east side of Prescott Valley. The developers are interested and willing to try it out. CWAG then pitched WND to the Town of Prescott Valley — they are also interested. The goal is to use the first phase of the development as a demonstration project, and negotiations are now in progress to adapt existing landscape codes to reduce water use, establish a stormwater plan, and specify monitoring.

Prescott Valley has already developed excellent plans for stormwater management. Brown Homes has already experimented with low-water-use landscapes in Chino Valley.

The project is just beginning so the details are yet unknown, but at this point it is headed in the right direction. CWAG appreciates the willingness of Prescott Valley and the developers to try something new, and we encourage the parties to complete a development agreement that includes a demonstration project for WND.

We wonder why the Arizona Department of Water Resources does not work on new approaches like WND. Surely there are more good ideas out there, but the Legislature is apparently concerned only with facilitating development, not preserving our water supply for future generations.

Current water policy has been unsuccessful, stuck in a bog created by the Legislature. If we don't do something different, nothing will change. We must not accept a future with huge overdrafts. Water Neutral Development may be a useful step toward a better water future.

On March 9, CWAG will host a panel of representatives from area municipalities and ADEQ on "Drinking Water Quality in the Prescott Active Management Area." Details under "Next Event" at cwagaz.org .

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