

GUEST COLUMN



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The upper Verde River is in danger of extinction. If groundwater pumping from the Big Chino basin is not controlled, this section of the live, free flowing river will eventually be lost for all time.

Gov. Doug Ducey, in his Jan. 10 State of the State address, called upon the Legislature to act promptly on water reform. This provides a moment for Prescott and Yavapai County to obtain legislation that will help assure the future of both the river and ongoing development.

The threats are coming from many directions, starting with proliferating subdivision proposals and lot splits. The Yavapai County supervisors have considered an on-again, off-again proposal for 9,500 units at Yavapai Ranch in the Big Chino basin north of Prescott. The surrounding area is now zoned to permit tens of thousands of new homes. Subdivision developers and industries locating in the Big Chino are outside the Prescott Active Management Area; they can pump groundwater without limit.

Industrial agriculture is an even bigger potential threat. To envision this future one need look only at the City of Kingman in Mohave County where more than 10,000 acres of

irrigated alfalfa and other crops are draining the Hualapai groundwater basin. This basin, the sole source of water for Kingman, is projected to be exhausted by the end of this century.

The most immediate threat comes from Prescott and Prescott Valley. These cities are considering pumping groundwater from the Big Chino basin and transport to Prescott via a 20-mile pipeline up to 12,000 acre feet per year, under all provisions in the existing legislation, an amount equal to the annual water consumption by the City of Flagstaff.

The growing impact of climate change will further stress the Big Chino groundwater basin and outflow that sustains the upper Verde. As temperatures rise, evaporation and water consumption by forest and grass cover will increase and there will be less rainfall and snowmelt recharging the aquifer.

Before proceeding with a pipeline, Prescott, Prescott Valley and Yavapai County should step back, take into account all present and future demands on the Big Chino basin, and then prepare a meaningful management plan for the entire basin.

At present the Arizona Department of Water Resources lacks both jurisdiction and the will to work through these issues and plan for the future. Worse yet, the Legislature has never delegated authority to Yavapai County to manage groundwater. Without oversight, a race to the bottom of the aquifer will inevitably occur, a disaster for both sustainable development and the remaining flow in the upper Verde River.

In addition to some measure of regulatory authority to protect year-round Verde River flow, the Legislature should limit future expansion of irrigated agriculture in the Big Chino basin. Large scale irrigated agriculture is no longer allowed within the Prescott Active Management Area. This limitation should now be extended to the Big Chino basin.

Prescott has come a long way toward managing groundwater resources within the city. The legislative creation of the Prescott Active Management Area in 1980 has stimulated impressive initiatives in conservation, use of recycled water and direct groundwater recharge.

But the job is not finished.

It is now time to return to the Legislature to obtain the tools necessary both to protect the Verde River and to assure a sustainable development future for all of Yavapai County.

Bruce Babbitt served as governor of Arizona from 1978 to 1987. He was the principal author of the Groundwater Management Act of 1980, which created the Prescott Active Management Area (AMA).