

# Workshop seeks to spawn new group

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PRESCOTT — A group of Prescott-area residents is seeking to organize a citizen-based group that focuses on water issues.

They hosted a "Local Water Trends" workshop Saturday overlooking Watson Lake in Prescott, and they hope it will be a catalyst for people to officially organize a local water group during another meeting at 10 a.m. this coming Saturday at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 882 Sunset Ave. in Prescott.

Organizer Kay Lauster envisions a group similar to the Verde River Citizens Alliance based in the Verde Valley.

Nearly 100 people attended last Saturday's workshop, and they heard a similar theme from the speakers: this region has limited water resources that people need to protect in order to preserve.

They also heard that it is worthwhile to create a local citizen-based group.

"There are many issues you're united on, but up until now, you've been speaking with individual voices," said State Rep. Tom O'Halleran, R-Village of Oak Creek.

Prescott Active Management Area Director Jim Holt said the 485-square-mile Prescott AMA

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needs three things to ensure enough water for its future: more renewable water supplies such as recycled effluent, more water conservation, and water from outside the AMA. That makes it necessary to study using sources such as the neighboring Big Chino aquifer, he said.

"We've already dug our hole too deep" to reach the AMA's state-mandated goal of "safe yield" by 2025 using only the Little Chino aquifer's groundwater, Holt said. Safe yield means an equilibrium between the amount of water people take out of the aquifer and the amount that replenishes it.

One person in the audience asked AMA officials to add teeth to the Prescott AMA goal of safe yield by 2025. Another audience suggestion that the teeth could be a moratorium on building permits drew loud applause.

Holt noted that the Prescott AMA already has one sort of moratorium. No new subdivision can use groundwater.

However, that moratorium has spurred an increase in the number of lot splits surrounding the AMA, including the area above the Big Chino aquifer, O'Halleran observed.

The consequences of groundwater overuse could be severe on the Verde River, U.S. Geological Survey researcher Laurie Wirt warned.

## Audience has its own ideas

PRESCOTT — Speakers and organizers at Saturday's Local Water Trends workshop frequently turned questions back to the audience.

At the end of the morning, people offered a variety of their own ideas about how to preserve water resources, including:

- More regional water-use planning.
- Stop using groundwater on golf courses.
- Base land zoning on water availability.
- Create laws requiring water conservation.
- Increase the price of water as another way to force conservation.
- The federal government

should pay for research on new ways to conserve water.

• Make information about water conservation, such as methods to capture and reuse gray water, more accessible to the public.

Russ Radden of the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Office in Prescott noted that his office has such information available. It is located on the south end of Marina Street in a county government building.

The Prescott AMA office also has lots of materials about local water needs and supplies, Holt said. It is located one block west of Highway 89 and one block north of Willow Lake Road.

No matter how much groundwater is available in the Big Chino aquifer, the basin is only 20 to 30 feet higher than headwaters of the Verde River, Wirt said. So it wouldn't take long to reduce the flow of the river if the water table drops.

Some people have told him they're not worried about the local water supply because they have used AMA office statistics to conclude a 300-year supply exists even with current use, Holt said. But that's assuming that the use won't increase and that we can extract every drop from the Little Chino aquifer, he noted.

O'Halleran debunked other ideas such as getting water from icebergs and desalination plants, saying the cost would be beyond belief. Even a pipeline from Lake Powell could cost about \$3,000 per acre-foot, he said.

The current drought makes water-use planning even more urgent.

George Howard of the National Weather Service said some scientists believe a long-term weather pattern in the north Pacific called the Pacific Decadal Oscillation may keep this region in a drought for many years to come.

The northern Pacific waters were in a warm phase from 1977 to 1995. When they shifted to cooler temperatures in 1996, Arizona's drought cycle began.

"We could be looking at many, many more dry years," Howard said.

On the bright side, forecasters are predicting slightly higher-than-normal precipitation for northern Arizona this winter as a moderate El Niño pattern settles in.

But long-term forecasters are predicting that the drought is likely to continue on through next spring's wildfire season at the least, and that's without adding in the complex effects of the Decadal Oscillation. This region has only a 3 percent to 6 percent chance of getting out of its drought by spring, Howard said.

"It's going to be an issue forever," because we live in a desert, O'Halleran said.

He urged people to contact Gov. Jane Hull this week as she ponders whether to stick with the Arizona Department of Water Resources' recommendation to eliminate the entire budget for the Rural Watershed Initiative Program and the Water Protection Fund that supply money for rural water studies.

The savings from these cuts will be nothing compared to the cost of delayed water-use decisions, O'Halleran said.

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