

Citizens Water Advocacy Group Position: Big Chino Water Ranch Pipeline Project



Summary:

CWAG has concluded that the Big Chino Water Ranch project should only proceed if key issues are resolved that assure a sustainable water future for the Upper Verde River and the Prescott Active Management Area.

Water is fundamental to all life:

In recognition that water is fundamental to all life, the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) advocates a sustainable water future in the Upper Verde River Basin and the Prescott Active Management Area.

CWAG is vitally concerned with the viability of the Verde River because it is a remarkable wild-life habitat (hosting fifteen species protected by the Endangered Species Act), an important cultural, historical, and recreational site, an economic engine for Yavapai County, a vital water supply for Phoenix, and the sole surviving living perennial river in Arizona. Groundwater from the Big Chino Valley supplies over 80% of the base flow of the 25-mile section between Paulden and Perkinsville; thus groundwater pumping from aquifers beneath the Big Chino Valley is a grave threat to the upper Verde River.



Downstream Verde River view near Duff Springs/Photo: Gary Beverly

The proposed Big Chino Water Ranch (BCWR), a joint project of the City of Prescott and the Town of Prescott Valley (COP/PV), includes a pipeline designed to transport up to 12,000 acre-feet per year of Big Chino groundwater to the Prescott region. Many scientific studies by the United States Geological Survey have shown that groundwater pumping will remove water that would otherwise flow to the river; the base flow would be reduced by an amount equivalent to the quantity pumped. After years of careful study of these scientific publications, CWAG has concluded that the Big Chino Water Ranch project should not go forward unless the following key issues are resolved.

Key Issues:

Mitigation Plan – As part of a 2010 litigation settlement with the Salt River Project, the BCWR partners have promised to mitigate any effects on base flow due to their pumping. Common sense requires that a practical, scientifically valid, and fully funded mitigation plan must be in place in advance of pumping to prevent the upper Verde River from eventually suffering a debilitating loss of base flow. CWAG defines mitigation as: 1) No diminution in base flow from project pumping; 2) No degradation in water quality; and 3) Preservation of historical flood flows. Unless an acceptable mitigation plan is developed, national environmental organizations plan to litigate, and landowners will likely join in. These lawsuits could drag on for years at taxpayer expense. To date no scientific mitigation plan has been published and no

alternative water sources have been identified. A realistic, fully funded mitigation plan - in advance of construction - is essential.

Safe Yield Plan – Although the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) and COP/PV suggest that Big Chino water could bring the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA) into safe yield, no official safe yield plan exists. However, even the maximum capacity of the BCWR project would be insufficient to bring the PrAMA into safe yield. COP/PV have not committed any BCWR water to safe yield; instead they have committed BCWR water to new subdivision construction. CWAG opposes diminishing the flow of the upper Verde River in order to meet safe yield in the PrAMA. CWAG neither encourages nor opposes growth; our mission is to achieve a sustainable water supply and to protect the Verde River.

Financing – Because “growth should pay for growth,” owners of future annexation tracts should pay, prior to annexation, a portion of the total BCWR costs - including construction, operation, mitigation, litigation, and financing - proportionate to their share of project water consumption.

Voter Approval – In 2009 voters in Prescott approved, by a near two-thirds majority, Proposition 401 amending the Prescott City Charter to require voter approval of infrastructure (such as the BCWR) over \$40 million. Since current estimates of Prescott’s share of the total BCWR costs greatly exceed \$40 million, Prop 401 clearly requires voter approval for the BCWR project.

Evaluate Alternative Sources – Before investing hundreds of millions of dollars of public funds in the BCWR, all possible alternative sources of water must be explored. All existing studies have focused on importation using centralized infrastructure. No prior studies have investigated the potential contribution of distributed solutions (aggressive conservation and rainwater harvesting). Before committing to the BCWR, CWAG recommends that COP/PV conduct a comprehensive analysis, with public participation, of the economic and ecological characteristics of all water resource alternatives, including importation, aggressive conservation, direct potable reuse, storm-water recharge, and rainwater harvesting. It should be assumed that the best solution would be a combination of alternatives.

CONCLUSION:

There is no evidence that the BCWR is the optimal or sufficient alternative to assure a sustainable water supply, and substantial scientific study shows that the BCWR will threaten the upper Verde River. The Big Chino Water Ranch project should be postponed until the issues and concerns listed above are resolved.