

# Column: Can we resolve rural water issues?

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Sharp on the heels of one of the most divisive presidential elections in recent history comes more provocative news; this time, not for the country but for the county. The issue? Arizona's most contentious one – water.

Yavapai County Supervisors Craig Brown, Dist. 4, and Tom Thurman, Dist. 2, were featured speakers at the Nov. 12 meeting of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) where they expressed their frustration and concern over managing water at the county level.

Thurman started his presentation by pointing out Yavapai County is about the size of New Jersey but with a fraction of the population. His main point was county supervisors are managing a large geographic area with financial resources provided by a small taxpayer base. A quick online look at 2015 population numbers shows New Jersey's population at about 8,958,000 and Yavapai County at 211,000; a population merely 2.4 percent of the burgeoning East Coast state.

Brown pointed out his district is “the fastest growing area in Yavapai County” and “this is the area where most people are coming to retire,” which creates special challenges. He displayed a graph of Yavapai County population growth from 1870 to 2010 showing an almost vertical increase from 1970 with about 32,000 people to about 210,000 people in 2010.

Both supervisors expressed concern over inefficient farming practices such as flood irrigation. Thurman firmly stated “flood irrigation is a horrible water waster.” Brown pointed out that half of Chino Valley is in a flood irrigation zone and many of the farms in the Paulden area are “sod farms which means grass” – a water - intensive crop.

While both of these points have merit, Arizona Department of Water Resource's (ADWR) “Fourth Management Plan Prescott Active Management Area Summary Budget” released in August 2012 clearly shows significant changes in water usage among the agricultural and municipal sectors. Agricultural use was at 20,987 acre-feet per year in 1985 and dropped to 2,455 acre-feet per year in 2010, an almost 90 percent reduction in 25 years. However, municipal use increased from 4,749 acre-feet per year to 17,899 acre-feet per year over the same time period, which coincides with the large growth in population in our area.

Another challenge is the “Private Property Rights Protection Act,” or simply Prop 207, a ballot initiative passed in 2006, which requires the government to reimburse landowners if there is a decline in property values due to their actions. County officials statewide are leery of triggering a Prop 207 lawsuit by getting too involved in water management.

When considering zoning decisions, “the county has no jurisdiction and consideration of the impact on people's wells is off-limits,” Brown said. Equally frustrating to Brown is the fact that while ADWR regulates water, “there's no enforcement capability from ADWR.”

How are county supervisors handling water resource issues given such overwhelming constraints? They've found one of the most successful ways is to work with developers to build subdivisions. While it sounds almost paradoxical, officials note that subdivisions must comply with county codes regarding streets and utilities. As a result, they can help influence a developer to set up utilities that

can promote aquifer recharge.

Where would county officials like to see improvement? Essentially, they'd like the legislature to provide more funding for rural water initiatives and allow for local input into water management decisions. Thurman said, “You don't want to make a blanket (water) policy because every area is different,” adding that a basin-by-basin approach might be good.

Still, county and municipal officials shouldn't be expected to tackle regional water issues without our support. Finger-pointing doesn't get us anywhere. We should all take part in maximizing water efficiency in and around our homes. Even simple things like shutting the water off while brushing your teeth, embracing water-efficient landscaping and using WaterSense products can make a huge difference in our collective water use.

Residents in Prescott can take advantage of several different water conservation rebates the city offers. CWAG has many educational resources available. For more information, visit [www.cwagAZ.org](http://www.cwagAZ.org) or contact us at [info@cwagAZ.org](mailto:info@cwagAZ.org). Together we can all make a difference.

Watch the Nov. 12 meeting video at <http://cwagaz.org/resources/video-archive>.

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