

# Talk of the Town: Do more houses hurt the Verde River?

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At least 80% of the upper Verde River base flow comes from Big Chino groundwater. (Citizens Water Advocacy Group/Courtesy)

By GARY BEVERLY, PH.D Special to the Courier

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Do more houses hurt the Verde River? Yes. Every new home consumes groundwater, diminishing the life-sustaining perennial flow in the Verde River – Arizona’s only surviving living river.

Since Arizona’s statehood, groundwater pumping and surface water diversions have severely impacted major groundwater basins and seriously degraded five of Arizona’s major perennial rivers: the Colorado, Gila, Salt, Santa Cruz, and much of the San Pedro. Only the Verde River survives, supporting a rich diversity of wildlife – including 16 species listed under the Endangered Species Act, plus many other benefits (see “Ten Reasons to Protect the Verde” on [cwagaz.org](http://cwagaz.org))

Despite the Verde’s importance, we are drying it up. The 2018 annual flow volume was 61% of the estimated flow in 1940. Some of that decline reflects persistent drought, but groundwater pumping takes a huge toll. Every gallon of groundwater pumped reduces river flow.

Instead of protecting rivers and springs, state water laws facilitate ever more groundwater pumping to support unsustainable growth. Consequently, in the Prescott Active Management Area the groundwater overdraft is large and growing, aquifer water levels are dropping, and Del Rio Springs, the historical headwaters of the Verde River, is now at 10% of its former flow. Meanwhile, local officials claim that they are only doing what the law allows.

Prescott officials contend that new water policies will benefit the aquifer, but at least 30% of the water delivered to every new home is lost and cannot be recharged. Although Prescott and Prescott Valley recharge treated wastewater, they reserve essentially all of that water to support new development; there is no benefit to the aquifer. All new housing should have net-zero impact on the aquifer.

Groundwater pumping from the Big Chino aquifer (underlying Williamson Valley, Paulden, and the Big Chino Valley) is even more serious. At least 80% of the upper Verde River base flow comes from Big Chino groundwater.

In the Big Chino, population growth, agricultural irrigation, and groundwater exports to Prescott and Prescott Valley threaten to dry up the upper Verde. Arizona water law ignores these threats.

Domestic wells in Paulden already reduce the river flow. That impact will increase as the community grows. The Board of Supervisors should control this threat.

Arizona law permits a farmer to irrigate in the Big Chino using groundwater. The Arizona Legislature has failed to control this threat.

Arizona water law authorizes Prescott and Prescott Valley to export Big Chino groundwater – more than enough to dry the Verde River – via a proposed pipeline to Prescott and Prescott Valley. The cities have promised to offset the effects of their pumping on the river, but no mitigation plans have been released.

We can protect the Verde River, but it's up to us. The state government won't help. County and municipal officials need to work together, acknowledge the problem, plan to invest in major conservation programs, and investigate alternatives.

As citizens, we can minimize outdoor water use, install efficient appliances, and let our officials know that current policies are unsustainable and unacceptable.

Most importantly, in the upcoming Prescott election, vote for candidates who support a secure water future and a flowing Verde River.

I will provide an update on the Verde and its future in a Zoom presentation on Apr. 10. For details and Zoom link: [www.cwagaz.org](http://www.cwagaz.org).

*Gary Beverly is president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.*

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