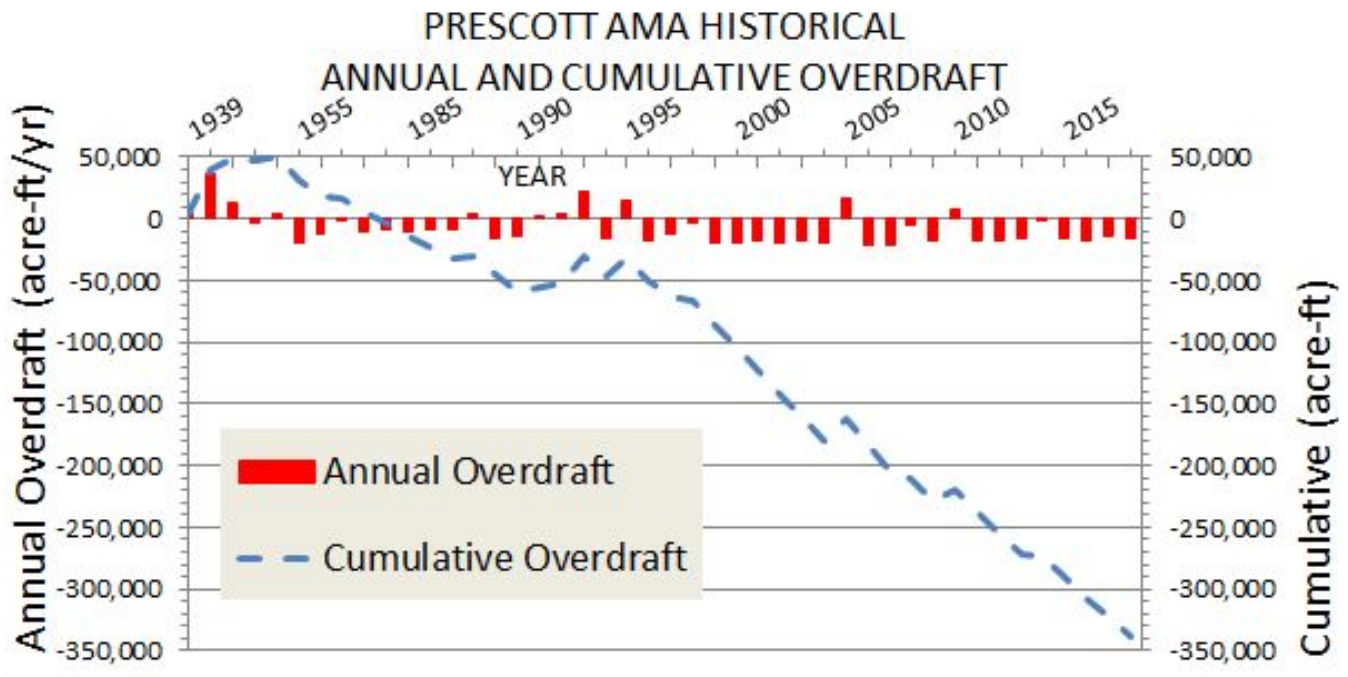


Talk of the Town: Water reality – shock



Data reveals the cumulative loss of groundwater.

GARY BEVERLY, Special to the Courier
Originally Published: April 9, 2022 5:20 p.m.

Reality is tough news these days, especially when it comes to water.

Data gathered by the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) since 1985 describes our water reality: the Prescott Active Management Area (PrAMA) has the highest overdraft percentage in the state.

Because we pump more than is recharged, the annual loss of groundwater is over 18,000 acre-feet per year (afy) – that’s a football field filled 3.5 miles deep, every year.

Water levels in the Little Chino aquifer, the northern part of the PrAMA, have fallen over 100 feet. Over 500 wells on the edges of the aquifer are in trouble. Del Rio Springs, the historical source for the Verde River, is now less than 10% of the original flow. The base flow of the Verde River declines every year. And, for the past quarter century, we have been afflicted with a regional drought – the most extreme in the last 1,200 years – that shows no sign of ending soon.

Logically, you might assume the above water reality would affect how we manage water use, but local policies and state law don't seem to get the message.

Legal reality is very different. The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) estimates that Arizona water law now authorizes supplying groundwater to over 90,000 new homes in the PrAMA, enough for over 40 years at current growth rates. Since every new home consumes groundwater, the overdraft could double.

Summed up, current law permits a population increase of over 180,000, despite drought and overdraft.

In this context, it is amazing that the Yavapai County Contractors Association (YCCA) can openly advocate that Prescott should supply water without annexation to accelerate new home construction (Courier Talk of the Town, March 31). Apparently, the YCCA's short-term self-interest blinds them to the long-term community interest requiring a sustainable water supply for a healthy economy. Instead of magnifying the water shortage, can the YCCA become part of the solution? How about developers designing subdivisions that are groundwater neutral and have no impact on the aquifer?

ADWR has just released the newest draft of the Fifth Management Plan with some improvements, but it continues ineffective management that fails to protect our water. It contains no analysis of why previous plans failed and shows no proof that the new plan will work. It proposes weak conservation requirements for cities and none for the county. It surrenders the PrAMA to eternal groundwater overdrafts that cannot continue forever (that's physically impossible), so we face a disappearing groundwater supply.

Beginning in 2000, when the overdraft was only 4,500 afy, the law required ADWR to issue a new PrAMA management plan every decade to achieve safe yield by 2025. As of 2019, after several management plans, the annual groundwater overdraft exceeded 18,000 afy; the cumulative loss is enormous. Since 2004, CWAG has consistently criticized the plans as weak and ineffective, and the new data shows that we are right.

Arizona water law must be modernized. Rural Arizona (primarily Mohave, Cochise and Yavapai counties) needs better management, yet the current state legislature consistently refuses to move some helpful bills to a vote.

Our current legislature and water laws are not going to help us. This is a political problem and the solution is in our hands. CWAG recommends that citizens ask candidates about their views on water issues, and take that info to the ballot box.

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