

# The Daily Courier

Friday, July 09, 2010

## **Talk of the Town**

### **Column: Time to let public in on SRP agreement**

By LESLIE HOY Special to the Courier

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Does the agreement with the [Salt River Project](#) mean our water problems are solved? Can we sit back and forget about water while SRP, Prescott and Prescott Valley negotiate behind closed doors?

On Feb. 11, 2010, SRP and the two communities announced an agreement in principle to mutually achieve certain objectives related to the withdrawal and use of water from the Big Chino Sub-Basin, including "protection of stream flow in the Upper Verde River." The Citizens Water Advocacy Group was cautiously hopeful. We perceived the agreement as perhaps an important step toward a sustainable water future. (To read the full agreement, visit [www.cwagaz.org/srp\\_cop.pdf](http://www.cwagaz.org/srp_cop.pdf).)

Much of the agreement aimed at eliminating the very costly litigation between SRP and the communities. On April 26, Gov. Jan Brewer signed into law Senate Bill 1445, an amendment to four sections of the Groundwater Code.

SB 1445 appears to accomplish three objectives set out in the agreement: 1) the amount of water Prescott can import from the Big Chino Sub-Basin is quantified as 8,068 acre-feet per year; 2) the law allowing Prescott to do this will no longer be considered a special law; and 3) Prescott can share the water with Prescott Valley.

The above objectives are essential to resolution of the litigation. However, CWAG's concern with the agreement is that although mitigation to protect river flow is mentioned, the agreement does not call for a mitigation plan prior to construction of the Big Chino pipeline.

The agreement states, "The communities agree that in the event the withdrawal of water from the Big Chino Sub-Basin is negatively affecting the minimum flow of water in the Upper Verde River, they will mitigate such impact proportionately to the extent of the effect of their combined withdrawals on the Upper Verde River as compared to the effect of the withdrawals by other water users in the Big Chino aquifer," and, in a later section, "measures for protecting the Upper Verde River which may include mitigation triggers and actions."

In addition, the communities agree to participate in the financing and implementation of the Big Chino Sub-Basin Monitoring Plan, details of which have not yet been made public, and in the funding, creation, and implementation of a Big Chino Sub-Basin Groundwater Model. Both of these will be very expensive and, in fact, the [City of Prescott](#) 2011 budget includes \$350,000 for groundwater modeling.

If the purpose of groundwater modeling and monitoring is to forecast reductions in baseflow of the

Upper Verde resulting from groundwater pumping, it seems that preparing a mitigation plan prior to pumping would make sense. CWAG believes that once withdrawal affects groundwater levels or the minimum flow of the river, it's likely to be too difficult to avoid or to mitigate major environmental and economic damage. In addition, hundreds of households may already be using the water. We certainly couldn't stop providing water to those new households.

SRP and the communities need to explain how it is possible to develop and implement a plan after the groundwater levels and baseflow of the river have declined. Until they do explain, the agreement is insufficient.

CWAG believes two other "Related Items" to be resolved are of utmost importance. One is the creation of "one or several water management" mechanisms to benefit the Big Chino Sub-Basin, to "include working to establish a quantity cap for groundwater withdrawals from the Big Chino aquifer..." At the Feb. 11 meeting, City of Prescott Regional Programs Director Craig McConnell said with regard to this item that the objective is not to solve the water-mining problem in the Little Chino by creating a water-mining problem in the Big Chino.

The second item is "Wild and Scenic" designation for the headwaters of the Verde River and maintaining minimum in-stream flow. Watch Gary Beverly's excellent May 8 presentation to CWAG on this subject on the video section of the CWAG website at [www.cwagaz.org](http://www.cwagaz.org).

At the Feb. 11 meeting, asked if the public or other citizen groups would be given the opportunity to be stakeholders in the process, McConnell said that the public is always a stakeholder. However, nearly five months have passed and program development continues behind closed doors. CWAG believes it's time for our communities to tell us more about what's going on and allow citizens to become more involved in the process.

Dr. Peter Kroopnick will demonstrate ground-water models at CWAG's general meeting today, July 10. Please send your questions and comments to [info@cwagaz.org](mailto:info@cwagaz.org).

Leslie Hoy is the vice president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and has had a lifelong interest in water issues.

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