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Talk of the Town

Column: New water sources: What are our options?

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All parties to our local water debates agree that we will need more water to achieve safe yield and accommodate expected population growth. The real water questions are how much, how soon, and where will it come from.

In today's column and in our next two columns, the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) will outline what we think are the best answers, as well as what issues still need to be resolved.

The Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resources Management Study (CYHWRMS) is starting the third year of a three-year \$600,000 planning activity. It is led by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) in conjunction with the Arizona Department of Water Resources, Yavapai County, and municipal and private water providers in the Prescott and Verde Valley regions. Its proceedings are open to the public, and information about the study can be obtained at www.co.yavapai.az.us/Content.aspx?id=35958.

For the study's initial objective, each water provider evaluated its supply and population growth to the year 2050. Based on that supply and increased demand, the study determined that there will be an annual shortfall of about 78,000 acre-feet (an acre-foot is 325,851 gallons) for the combined Prescott and Verde Valley regions. Now, each provider must vote on the best methods to individually or cooperatively satisfy the projected water shortages.

For the Prescott region alone, the annual shortfall is projected to be about 54,000 acre-feet. To provide perspective on the size of the shortfall, recognize that the Prescott region's current annual demand is about 26,000 acre-feet and natural annual recharge to our aquifer is about 8,000 acre-feet.

Although the CYHWRMS study will explore all possible sources of water, many of the participants believe that the Colorado River offers the best chance of supplying the large quantity needed. Our region is not alone in eyeing the Colorado. Jurisdictions in Coconino County have been engaged in a study with the BOR for 10 years and have determined that a pipeline from the Colorado River is their best option to meet future demand. In a cost sharing partnership with the BOR, Coconino County is now working on a five-year preliminary design and cost feasibility study for this pipeline.

It is widely understood that the Colorado River has less flow than the amount of water allocated to the users. The over-allocation resulted from the abnormally high flows that occurred before the allocation agreement in the 1920s.

In spite of the over-allocation, reliable quantities of water rights can be purchased from users that have higher priority water. In the priority system, when Colorado River flow is inadequate to meet all legal allocations, the lower priorities are cut back first. For example, certain Yuma farmers have the highest priority; thus the lower priority Central Arizona Project would be cut back first.

A prospect that could make obtaining water from the Colorado River more economical would be a partnership between our study area and Coconino County for a common pipeline. Although a great deal of work remains, our CYHWRMS study is a promising investigation into satisfying the Prescott region's current overdraft and expected shortfall.

A few years ago, CWAG took the position that local jurisdictions should wait for the results of the CYHWRMS study before committing to other expensive options, such as the proposed pipeline project to import water from the Big Chino Valley. Some Prescott officials suggested that our position was not workable because water would be needed before the CYHWRMS study could be completed.

Now, however, the Big Chino pipeline project is on hold while our communities negotiate with the [Salt River Project](#) on programs to monitor, model and mitigate the effects of importation on the Verde River. Furthermore, there doesn't appear to be a near-term demand by developers for new water, and the pipeline project is not included in the city's five-year capital improvement plan.

In our next column, we will evaluate how soon we will need new water to satisfy demand from growth and describe steps the Prescott region should take now to move toward achieving safe yield.

Please submit your comments and questions to info@cwagaz.org.

Kris Mayes, a Prescott native, former Arizona Corporation Commission (ACC) chair, and founding director of the Program on Law and Sustainability at [Arizona State University](#)'s Sandra Day O'Connor College of Law, will discuss "Sustainability in Arizona," with a focus on understanding the water-energy nexus, when she speaks to CWAG on Mar. 12 from 10 a.m. to noon at the Granite Peak Unitarian Universalist Congregation, 882 Sunset in Prescott. Details are at www.cwagaz.org.

Ken Janecek is member of CWAG's Board of Directors and a retired chemical engineer. He has been active on local water issues for 10 years.

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