

The Daily Courier

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Talk of the Town: New water sources: What are our options? Part 2

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In our Feb. 26 column, the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) described the Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resources Management Study (CYHWRMS), a major regional study. CYHWRMS could lead to the best long-term solution for the water shortfalls in the Prescott and Verde Valley regions. Completion of the study and implementation of its recommendations could take 10 to 15 years.

Today's column will address the question: Can we wait that long to obtain new water sources for safe yield and new growth?

Because the Big Chino Project is on hold for at least five years, and because the local jurisdictions have not dedicated a single drop of water to safe yield nor developed a plan to reach safe yield, it is clear that we won't achieve safe yield soon.

However, CWAG continues to believe our area can and should work to reach safe yield by 2025, the target date the state set. To reach safe yield, we will need to find new water. Whether to import water from the Big Chino aquifer, harvest rainwater, increase reuse and conservation or select from potential sources identified by the CYHWRMS study are decisions Prescott officials and voters must confront.

We have 14 years to achieve safe yield, but we don't have 14 years to start planning. Local jurisdictions should begin to work on the elements that are sure to be part of a sustainable safe yield future, including organizational structure and responsibilities, possible financing arrangements, the role of conservation in reducing demand, and possible large-scale rainwater harvesting projects.

Besides needing water for safe yield, the other potential need for water is to serve new growth. As strictly a water-issues group, CWAG doesn't take a position on the economic value or social desirability of any particular population growth rate for the community.

Even though the number of housing starts in the Prescott region has been miniscule for several years, local officials expect a return to normal growth sometime in the future, and some believe we will need new water supplies shortly after residential growth resumes.

Because there are a number of provisions in the active management area rules that allow additional

withdrawals from our aquifer in spite of being in overdraft, housing construction can continue for nearly three decades at our pre-recession rates without new sources of water.

For the [City of Prescott](#), these provisions include: all the still un-built lots that were approved prior to the 1999 declaration that our aquifer was out of safe yield; all the un-built lots that have been approved using alternative sources of water; and the many lots that can be approved based on recharged effluent credits that have not yet been allocated to homes.

To calculate the number of homes that could be built, CWAG analyzed the city's documentation of the above three categories. The analysis shows that Prescott could add at least 15,840 new homes without obtaining new water sources. This would result in a population increase of about 33,400, which is approximately a 74 percent increase over the current population.

During the boom years of 2003-2006, about 600 homes or 1,200 new residents, were added each year. If future housing construction were maintained at that rate, Prescott could grow for at least another 27 years without new water supplies.

CWAG's detailed and referenced report is based solely on numbers provided in two city documents and is available at <http://www.cwagaz.org/How%20Many%20Homes.pdf>. This report was provided to city officials and staff, and when the results were discussed with staff, no objections to the analysis were received.

Although the active management area groundwater withdrawal rules allow the construction calculated above, using local groundwater for new home construction will take us further from safe yield by further lowering our water table. Thus, any eventual solution to our overdraft would require that much additional water. It should be clear, however, that a desire to maintain a residential construction industry need not force us into making a hasty decision on how best to obtain new water.

When we know the results of the CYHWRMS study, we will better understand our options for new water, including the viability of the Big Chino pipeline and a mitigation plan to protect the Verde River. In the interim, we need to work on the elements of a safe yield plan described above.

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

Ecosa Institute Director Tony Brown will present "Water Security: An Evolving Emergency" when he speaks to CWAG on Saturday, April 9. Details are at www.cwagaz.org.

Howard Mechanic is chair of the Public Policy Committee of Citizens Water Advocacy Group.

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