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Talk of the Town: Water issues - analysis and opinion

By LESLIE HOY
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Even with the slowdown in population growth, there's a lot happening on the water front. In today's column, I will touch on the issues on the minds of water managers, public officials and citizens who keep an eye on such things in the Prescott area.

USGS Model: The long-awaited, peer-reviewed Northern Arizona Regional Groundwater Flow Model was developed by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) in cooperation with the Arizona Department of Water Resources and Yavapai County for use primarily by water managers and communities.

The model has been paid for, including the cost of three scenario runs. Now it looks like the water managers for Prescott, and especially, Prescott Valley and Chino Valley, don't want to use it. They have raised a number of objections, all of which the USGS has countered.

At bottom, it appears the managers don't want the model used to run the scenarios, which will show pumping groundwater from the Big Chino aquifer would have an adverse effect on the flow of the Upper Verde River. The model, however, is publicly available, and the Verde River Basin Partnership, for example, plans to have the USGS run two or three pumping scenarios.

Regional Management Study: The purpose of the Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resources Management Study was to identify projected water demand and then outline water resources and management strategies to satisfy the defined future needs of communities in the Central Yavapai Highlands.

The first two phases of the study, which determined that projected demand exceeds current supply and identified possible sources for our future water supply, are complete. In Phase 3, now under way, the study participants will seek to choose a specific strategy, which could be a combination of actions such as conservation, rainwater harvesting, and importation. They will also define the federal nexus for proceeding with a feasibility study.

The final phase of the study will be writing the actual report and gaining consensus that the selected strategy will solve the projected water shortfall of 54,182 acre-feet per year for the Prescott Active Management Area - in comparison, current annual usage is approximately 20,000 acre-feet. The study could lead to specific projects to provide a sustainable water supply for the next 50 years and is likely our best shot at doing so.

It remains to be seen what the cost of our future water supply will be and whether the taxpayers

will be willing to pay. Learn more at www.co.yavapai.az.us/Content.aspx?id=35958.

Big Chino Pipeline: Commenting on a Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) question to City Council candidates about the pipeline, City Manager Craig McConnell wrote, "The city has not budgeted funding for construction of the Big Chino project pipeline in its capital improvement plan which extends through fiscal year 2017."

McConnell continued, "Since the city is not planning to build the project any time soon, we have the opportunity to continue more detailed monitoring and modeling of surface and groundwater flows, for the purpose of expanding our knowledge of their interaction, including future pumping from the Water Ranch, therefore providing a much firmer basis for projection of the effects of such pumping."

CWAG does not object to additional monitoring and modeling, of course, but whatever is going on currently is happening behind closed doors. In addition, the city doesn't seem to want to use the model developed by USGS, although it's possible that their consultants are running it or have run it and have chosen not to reveal the results. Readers can review the city's agreement with SRP at http://cwagaz.org/srp_cop.pdf.

Conservation: Thanks to the efforts of Prescott's Conservation Coordinator Shaun Rydell and Prescott's Water Conservation Committee (which no longer exists and should be re-established), Prescott got the top score in a recent Western Resource Advocates study of the conservation practices of 15 Arizona communities. Still, more could and should be done. Conservation is cheaper, faster, and easier than importing water.

Some areas to explore for further conservation benefits are a commercial and industrial conservation program, ordinances to require conservation measures for new construction and more aggressive investigation of water leaks.

For example, businesses can obtain credits for getting rid of old, inefficient toilets and installing new water-saving models. Not only will new toilets save water, but the business owner also is likely to gain substantial savings on water and sewer bills. Rydell says the best place to start is with an indoor and outdoor water audit. Any Prescott water customer can request an audit at www.cityofprescott.net/services/water/audit.php.

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

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