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Talk of the Town: Our water future - challenges, choices

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Three recently published water reports identify many of the complex challenges and choices confronting the state of Arizona. They are: 1) "Watering the Sun Corridor - Managing Choices in Arizona's Megapolitan Area" by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy; 2) "Arizona at the Crossroads: Water Scarcity or Water Sustainability?" by the Grand Canyon Institute; and 3) a preliminary report prepared by the state-mandated Water Resources Development Commission (WRDC). In this column, I will summarize some key observations in these reports and highlight their implications.

In the Morrison Institute report, attorney Grady Gammage wrote: "The very definition of water supply is a fluid matter, depending on priorities and jurisdictions, method of measurement, shifting needs (agriculture or urban, for instance), differing experts interpreting the same data and, yes, even climate change." He went on to say that in order for Arizona to provide new water for all of the people expected to move here in the next several decades, we would have to eliminate commercial agriculture and make "hard choices, primarily about landscaping and lifestyle."

Gammage concluded: "Will we have enough water for the next few generations - and the generations beyond that? Tomorrow's answer lies in today's question of whether we still have a shared commitment to this place and its future - and whether we will trust in the power of collective action to meet new challenges with the same faith and creativity as yesterday."

In the Grand Canyon Institute report, former Deputy Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources Karen Smith wrote: "Water resources drive Arizona's economy, including maintaining viable riparian and environmental flows so essential to the \$10.5B recreation and tourism industries. Without policy changes now to modify water demand to more sustainable levels, economic growth will be endangered."

Smith's report recommends that the state Legislature initiate five actions summarized here: 1) indicate its intent that reclaimed water be used for all purposes for which the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality believes it is safe and where it is physically possible to do so; 2) require water providers to issue detailed information to customers on water use and clear pricing for each block of water used; 3) create a commission to investigate Arizona's surface water legal framework and recommend changes that will provide greater flexibility in securing in-stream flow and riparian water rights; 4) create a commission to investigate market-based approaches to water allocation and management and recommend any needed changes in Arizona water law to enable their equitable implementation; and 5) create a statewide financing mechanism for water acquisition and

infrastructure that will provide a new revenue stream to fund new infrastructure and water acquisition costs.

The WRDC report is based on the work of five committees it established to help meet its mandated obligations: Population, Water Supply and Demand, Environmental, Finance, and Legislative Recommendations. In its report, the WRDC wrote: "However, due to the variability in Arizona's geology, climate, precipitation patterns, water use patterns, population growth and land ownership, evaluation of the issues and development of comprehensive solutions is extremely difficult." The authors of the report concluded that " . . . decisions must be made regarding what solutions will be most effective in discrete regions, how those solutions will be funded, and whether implementation of the solutions require legislative changes."

The communities in our "discrete region," the Prescott Active Management Area (AMA), do not operate in a political vacuum when it comes to managing our water resources. Although there are many things local leaders can do on their own (stimulate conservation, create a safe yield plan, protect the Verde River's baseflow from the impact of pumping the Big Chino aquifer, etc.), they cannot create robust new state-supported financing mechanisms to pay for staggeringly expensive water infrastructure and acquisition costs. Or decide whether and how Arizona's antiquated water laws should be modernized. How, when and if the state Legislature addresses those challenges and choices will have a major impact on many of the actions our local leaders can take to create a sustainable water supply in the Prescott AMA.

Arizona's most formidable challenge when it comes to managing water is time. The problems identified in these reports will take years - maybe decades - to resolve satisfactorily. If time runs out before the challenges are met and the choices are made, it will be "game over" for Arizona's future water supply.

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

Chris Hoy is a member of the board of directors of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group.

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