

The Daily Courier

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Talk of the Town: 150th anniversary of Del Rio Springs

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In fall 1863, the U.S. Army established a fort at Del Rio Springs, near the present Highway 89 between Chino Valley and Paulden, to protect Prescott area miners and settlers from Indian conflicts. This year, in recognition of the importance of Del Rio Springs to our local history and economic development, several local community organizations are celebrating the sesquicentennial of the fort with a series of field tours and public events extending through Spring 2014. See the events calendar at www.cwagaz.org.

Unfortunately, the celebration is also a remembrance. Del Rio Springs is drying up, so the sesquicentennial becomes an opportunity to learn how our current groundwater pumping will change our future.

The tri-cities' water supply relies on groundwater pumped from the Little Chino Aquifer; thus we capture and divert groundwater naturally destined for the springs and the Verde River. Because we pump far more water than is recharged (overdraft), we are depleting stored groundwater reserves, just as if we continuously spent more money than we earned and depended on our savings account for the difference. The result is that groundwater levels throughout Chino Valley and the flow from Del Rio Springs continue their historical decline. Del Rio Springs now produces only a tenth of its original flow. Arizona Department of Water Resources groundwater models estimate that the springs will be completely dry by 2025.

The drying of Del Rio Springs is a direct result of several decades of overdraft. Achieving safe yield in the Prescott Active Management Area will, over time, halt the decline in flow from Del Rio Springs and subsequently into the upper Verde River.

Drying up Del Rio Springs will destroy an icon of Arizona history. In 1863, Fort Whipple was established at Del Rio, which served as the first territorial capitol until 1864, when the capitol was moved to Prescott. Homesteaders farmed Del Rio until it was purchased by the [City of Prescott](#) in 1900 as a municipal water supply. Prescott pumped spring water 20 miles to town until 1910. Water from Del Rio Springs supported the economic development of Northern Arizona and the Grand Canyon. For decades, the Santa Fe Railroad hauled tank cars of Del Rio water to Seligman, Ash Fork, Williams, Winslow, and the south rim of the Grand Canyon. Del Rio hay and grain fed the dude and working stock in the Grand Canyon and supplied winter pasture into the 1950s. Dairy products from Del Rio Ranch fed Fred Harvey's tourist enterprises along the Santa Fe rail line from Chicago to Los Angeles.

Drying up Del Rio Springs will diminish our wildlife. During the last three breeding seasons, a pair of desert nesting bald eagles successfully fledged five chicks from a nest in a cottonwood tree near the springs. Neighboring cottonwoods support nests for great blue herons, owls, red-tailed hawks, and other raptors. Ecologists have found unique, endemic dragonflies at the springs. Pronghorn are abundant.

Historically, Del Rio Springs filled four miles of Little Chino Creek before joining Big Chino Wash to form the headwaters of the Verde River. That perennial riparian habitat is now gone, destroyed by groundwater mining.

The drying of Del Rio Springs by groundwater mining is a glimpse into the future of the upper Verde River.

Planned groundwater mining projects in the Big Chino Valley will intercept groundwater destined for the river, just as pumping in Chino Valley captures water destined for Del Rio Springs. Unmitigated groundwater mining in the Big Chino Valley will eventually turn the first 25 miles of the upper Verde River into a dry wash, destroying some of the finest surviving riparian habitat in the Southwest.

Although it's easy to overlook this slowly unfolding disaster, we should instead recognize that we could solve this problem and comfortably coexist with living springs and rivers. The drying of Del Rio Springs is a clear and present reminder that unless we consume less water, unless we develop a sustainable water supply, unless we care for our water dependent natural resources, our quality of life will suffer.

This year is the 150th anniversary of Anglo settlement at Del Rio Springs. Let's begin now to plan to sustain the springs, to mitigate the damage, and to preserve an icon of Arizona history. And, let us resolve that groundwater pumping will not dry up the upper Verde River, as is now occurring at Del Rio Springs.

Send your comments to info@cwagaz.org.

Tour Del Rio Springs on Oct. 12. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly is education committee chair for the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.

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