

# Column: Environmental water rights need representation

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GARY BEVERLY, Special to the Courier

- Originally Published: May 12, 2017 5:58 a.m.

Water is life! We envision a future where all citizens can live comfortable, economically secure lives with good jobs, and enjoy healthy natural areas with flowing rivers and springs, thriving riparian habitats, vigorous wildlife, and recreational opportunities. To sustain our lives and environment for the future, we need sustainable water policies.

Arizona needs to achieve a sustainable water future through effective management that controls surface water and groundwater in a manner that can be maintained for an indefinite time without unacceptable environmental, economic, or social consequences. To realize that goal, farmers and ranchers, cities and towns, tribal communities, business and industry, environmental interests, and everyday people must work together to better manage our water resources. To date, only cities, industry, and agriculture have set Arizona water policy.

Since Arizona's statehood, groundwater pumping and surface water diversions have severely impacted major groundwater basins and seriously degraded five of Arizona's major perennial rivers: the Colorado, Gila, Salt, Santa Cruz, and much of the San Pedro. Additionally, future perennial flow in the upper Verde River is deeply threatened. Degraded rivers harm hunting, fishing, boating, birding, and other water-based recreational activities that contribute to tourism – a \$20.9 billion industry bringing revenue from outside Arizona. For communities that have centered their way of life and economy on Arizona's rivers and streams, the loss of these waters will have a profound and adverse impact on their future.

To date, Arizona has been unable to bring neither surface water nor groundwater to a sustainable condition. The Gila Adjudication of surface water has cost a hundred million dollars over four decades with scant results. The 1980 Arizona Groundwater Management Act has failed to achieve safe yield in its five urban Active Management Areas covering only 13 percent of the state, has weak regulatory authorities, and is administratively underfunded. Rural residents now confront a myriad of threats to existing and future water supplies crucial to sustaining our rivers and communities.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) proposes to meet Arizona's future water needs with large scale, expensive infrastructure projects like desalination or importing water from somewhere else - like the Big Chino Water Ranch. We believe a clearer vision of water sustainability for Arizona's future would:

- Include environmental representatives in water policy discussions.
- Keep rivers, streams, and springs flowing.
- Consider the water needs of rural Arizona.
- Incorporate the high probability that climate change will afflict Arizona with multi-decadal droughts, increased temperatures, and diminished water supplies.
- Control water demand through creative and strong water conservation measures.
- Include a comprehensive economic evaluation of alternative augmentation techniques and advanced water reuse technology.

Arizona's water laws need to be modernized in consultation with cities, industry, agriculture, and environmental organizations. We should strive to simplify water law, address rural Arizona's water issues, integrate the best available science, and emphasize conservation, reuse, and the environment. It is time for both our leadership and everyday people to rise to the challenge.

Vincent Randall, Yavapai-Apache Nation Director of Apache Cultural Preservation, speaks about the Verde River May 13. See [www.cwagaz.org](http://www.cwagaz.org).

Gary Beverly chairs the Citizens Water Advocacy Group Education/Policy Committee and is a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.