

Verde Independent

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Commentary: Big Chino needs less talk, more action

Gary Beverly
My Turn

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For decades, thirsty local communities have dreamed of harvesting groundwater from the Big Chino Valley. The Arizona Legislature satisfied their dreams, disregarding concerns that the [Verde River](#) would be diminished, thus launching both litigation and dozens of studies.

Results have trickled out over the years, which makes it difficult to keep it all in perspective. The following is a summary and evaluation of the Big Chino/Verde River issue as it now stands. For more information see www.cwagaz.org.

We now recognize the Verde River as one of the most important ecological resources in the Southwest, as the only surviving perennial river in Arizona, and as deeply threatened by groundwater pumping.

The first 25 miles of the upper Verde, from Paulden to Perkinsville, relies on Verde Springs for baseflow, and over 80 percent of that water is groundwater from the Big Chino Valley.

Groundwater pumping is the problem, consisting of current pumping, pumping to meet future demand, and importation from the Big Chino Water Ranch. Every gallon of groundwater removed from the Big Chino is virtually one less gallon for the river.

Prior groundwater pumping in the Big Chino has already reduced the baseflow at the Paulden streamgage by a third. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) estimated that continuing the current pumping, plus modest population growth, would further reduce the baseflow.

Dr. Peter Kroopnick used the USGS model to test how baseflow responds to unmitigated operation of the Big Chino Pipeline and found yet another incremental reduction in baseflow. Add all this up and we've got trouble: In 2110 the Verde would be dry for six miles from Bear Siding to Perkinsville Bridge, destroying two extremely popular recreation sites and some of the finest riparian habitat remaining in Arizona.

What is being done to protect the river?

Destructive action: The Arizona Department of Water Resources Fourth Management Plan for the Prescott Active Management Area made no significant changes in water management and continued to suggest importing water from the Big Chino, which would not solve our local problems and would absolutely harm the river.

Lots of talk (and now no talk): The Board of Supervisors, dissatisfied by slow and inadequate progress, dissolved the Water Advisory Committee (WAC), our only regional water planning group, and has not yet



Bear Siding, a popular recreation spot on the upper Verde River, may be dry by 2110.

Gary Beverly photo

replaced it.

We encourage the supervisors to reboot regional water planning discussions, an essential step to resolving the largest problem - the elephant in the room is growing demand and pumping in the Big Chino.

Ineffective studies: The Central Yavapai Highlands Water Resource Management Study (CYHWRMS) used \$600,000 of taxpayer funds to calculate the water we need by 2050 and suggest some new ways to get it. This was a valuable endeavor, but it now languishes on the shelf - wasted effort - because the WAC no longer exists to give it direction.

More data: Currently, Prescott, Prescott Valley, and [Salt River Project](#) are cooperating in a multiyear study they characterize as improving our understanding of how the Big Chino Pipeline would affect the river. PV/Prescott promised in a non-legally binding agreement to mitigate their share of reduction in baseflow due to the pipeline, which would be good - if they keep that promise. However, the term "mitigate" has not yet been defined, the source of mitigation water has not been identified, and we have no idea of the cost.

Conservation needs more attention. Aggressive water conservation has tremendous potential to ease the overdraft, reduce groundwater pumping, and prolong the life of the Verde. Although Prescott has a top-rated water conservation program, it saves only a tiny fraction of what is necessary and possible. Water conservation programs in Yavapai County, Chino Valley, and Prescott Valley are barely minimal. We could, and should, do much better.

For example, rainwater harvesting could replace tap water for irrigating landscapes. Our wastewater recharge could be significantly improved.

New homes could be built that have zero net groundwater use, allowing the community to grow without worsening the water problem. Direct potable reuse of treated wastewater should be considered. We need water conservation programs for domestic wells. Future agricultural irrigation in the Big Chino should be controlled. The list goes on . . .

Are we merely merrily fiddling while the river dries up? We understand the problem. It's time for action. Citizens, city councils, and supervisors need to begin real progress to protect the Verde and assure our water supply.

On March 14, SRP's Greg Kornrumpf will discuss the Big Chino Sub-basin Progress Report. See www.cwagaz.org.

Submit questions to info@cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly is a Citizens Water Advocacy Group board member and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.

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