

The Daily Courier

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Talk of the Town

Column: Conservation - We can and must do more

Gary Beverly
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Our news is saturated with reports of regional drought causing surface water shortages in California and shrinking Colorado River reservoirs. These surface water supplies are renewable, but they depend on snow and rainfall, which vary between drought and flood.

The Prescott municipalities have no short-term water supply problem because we depend on groundwater. Groundwater is not renewable, but it is reliable - as long as it lasts. We now overdraft our aquifers, essentially living off our water savings account, which can't last forever.

Searching for solutions, state and local governments propose to repeat what has worked before - simply go get more water from somewhere else - but ocean desalination and pipelines from the Colorado River or the Big Chino will all be hugely expensive projects.

Conservation is the least expensive way to stretch tight water supplies, plus it is widely supported by citizens. When you have a problem, common sense says, "First, don't make it worse." Conservation can extend our water supply, reduce the size and cost of importation projects, help protect the Verde River, and provide citizens a role in addressing our water problem.

Our governments support water conservation, but only up to a point. To date, Yavapai County conservation programs have been moderately successful. Prescott, Prescott Valley, Chino Valley, and Yavapai County have adopted water-conserving building codes and educational programs. The tri-cities all use increasing block water rates. However, only Prescott offers incentives for water conservation devices; Western Resource Advocates ranked Prescott's water conservation program as the best in Arizona for decreasing water use by 13 percent from 2003-2008.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) specified water conservation requirements in the new management plan for the Prescott Active Management Area, but their rules fall far short of what is possible. Prescott and Prescott Valley can easily comply with little effort, and the rules do not apply to domestic wells or private water companies.

Due primarily to a fear of complaints from special interests and citizens, governments may be reluctant to support improved water conservation. For example, proposed landscape water ordinances in Prescott and Chino Valley were not adopted due to objections from local landscape business interests.

Surveys show that citizens prefer voluntary or educational programs to ordinances, but studies show that



The sun sets behind Watson Lake in Prescott.
(Matt Hinshaw/The Daily Courier)

educational and incentive programs have limited effectiveness - ordinances are more effective. To improve our water conservation efforts, we need a public dialogue to achieve an effective balance between voluntary and mandatory programs.

We can and should do far more. Nowhere are citizens asked to achieve a goal for reduced water use. None of the entities significantly control water use outside the home for either new or existing buildings. None of our cities provide public demonstrations of desirable landscapes. Other western cities have blazed a trail we could follow: Tucson requires new commercial buildings to use rainwater harvesting; Las Vegas has replaced miles of turf; Santa Fe has enacted a portfolio of innovative conservation programs; Albuquerque plans conservation programs through 2024.

Control of landscape water use is very important because it is roughly a third of total use and is completely lost to the atmosphere. Water used inside a home connected to the sewer is treated and recharged or recycled. When a home uses a septic tank system to treat wastewater, effluent recharge is site specific and ineffective. These simple facts suggest some potential solutions: replace septic tanks with municipal sewer system connections when economically possible, increase education and incentives for low water-use landscapes and rainwater harvesting systems, and restrict the use of groundwater on landscapes for new construction. In particular, rainwater harvesting has tremendous potential to cut our groundwater use and to increase recycling.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) is busily expanding our educational efforts by writing columns like this one, by offering public programs and field trips, by adding a conservation section to our website, and by teaching classes to the public and possibly to realtors. We are constructing a demonstration low water-use landscape site with rainwater harvesting. We are considering a voluntary "Conserve To Enhance" program where citizens can connect their conservation efforts to the environment. Finally, we are discussing how CWAG can assist the [City of Prescott](#) with their water conservation programs.

That's a lot of work and we could use some help. Will you volunteer to help with our conservation efforts? Email info@cwagaz.org or call 445-4218.

Gary Beverly is education committee chair for the Citizens Water Advocacy Group and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River. He will discuss "Why Water Conservation?" at the Sept. 13 CWAG meeting in Prescott. Details at www.cwagaz.org.

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