

## **Our state legislature has failed rural Arizona**

By GARY BEVERLY, PH.D, Special to the Courier

The Arizona House and Senate have failed to protect rural Arizona's vital water supply, especially in the Prescott Active Management Area, and they have also failed to protect the Verde River. The citizens of Yavapai County are not getting value from their tax dollars.

The state legislature created the laws that the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) must manage and enforce. In 1980, the Groundwater Management Act (GMA), then viewed as progressive, created ADWR and four Active Management Areas (AMAs) (two more were added later). The Tucson, Phoenix and Prescott AMAs were to be managed for Safe Yield — a balance between groundwater inflow and outflow. Forty-four years later, safe yield remains to be achieved, and the Prescott AMA has become the worst-performing AMA in the state.

About 75% of Prescott AMA pumping is in excess of safe yield, creating an “overdraft” of the aquifer, yet the GMA and ADWR continue to permit thousands of new homes. The legislature has authorized enough “paper water” to more than DOUBLE the current population, despite our growing overdraft. And, without considering environmental effects, the legislature authorized importing water from the Big Chino valley which will severely degrade the Verde River.

In the 87% of the state outside of AMAs, the legislature has failed to develop laws permitting rural areas (including Yavapai County) local management of our water resources. Primarily, that failure rests on Senate and House committee chairs Sine Kerr, R-Phoenix, and Gail Griffin, R-Sierra Vista, who for years have obstructed many good water bills. This last session, Griffin/Kerr wrote and rammed through a dozen bills that weakened existing water laws, already inadequate, to benefit Big Agriculture and to facilitate development. Thankfully, these were vetoed by Gov. Hobbs.

ADWR has no good data on groundwater pumping, and you can't manage what you don't measure. Yet Griffin/Kerr refused to listen to, much less approve, good bills that required large irrigators to report their pumping. Griffin/Kerr developed a Rural Basin Area bill — the title sounds great but it

was actually a cynical attempt to prevent rural water management and to benefit Big Agriculture and developers. They blocked a much better bill that included both surface and groundwater.

Water law and management are far too important to be controlled by only two legislators. Legislative District 1 (basically Yavapai County) needs to elect one senator and two representatives who will assure we have the ability to achieve a sustainable water supply and protect the Verde River. Our legislators should commit to modernizing water law to benefit rural Arizona.

The legislature must recognize the water-management needs outside Maricopa County. Rural Arizona has many serious water challenges in Willcox, Kingman, Gila Bend, Flagstaff and Yavapai County, for example. For 44 years the legislature has failed to manage groundwater. It's time to give rural areas the authority and opportunity to do better.

And we can do that. First, we need to learn where the LD1 candidates stand on water issues. Please attend the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) LD1 Water Issues Candidate Forum 10 a.m. to noon Oct. 5. CWAG is nonpartisan, but all water issues are political. The purpose of the forum is to insert water policy into our political and electoral dialogue and to inform voters and candidates about water issues. Please register for this Zoom-only presentation under "Next Event" at [cwagaz.org](http://cwagaz.org).

*Gary Beverly PhD is a member of the CWAG Executive Committee and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.*