

Talk of the Town: Upper Verde Watershed update — good and bad news

By GARY BEVERLY, Special to the Courier
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PROTECT OUR WATER

(Courtesy Logo)

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For two and one-half million years, the upper Verde River has flowed from the arid highlands of the Upper Verde River Watershed through the Verde Valley joining the Salt River 194 miles downstream. Clear, cool springs near Paulden fed by Big Chino groundwater create a perennial flow that supports a rich and diverse variety of plants, animals and fish, including a score of threatened, endangered and watched species.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) is watching the Verde very, very carefully, and we are alarmed. We are now witnessing the destruction of one of Arizona's last surviving perennial rivers. The base flow is at record-low levels, less than half of the predevelopment flow. Future serious threats include growing groundwater pumping, the Big Chino pipeline and climate change. You can view a full report at cwagaz.org.

However, there are some bright spots.

In the northwestern part of the Big Chino Valley, land exchanges, purchases, and conservation easements are converting a “checkerboard” of public and private land into public land managed by the Prescott National Forest (PNF). The Yavapai Apache Nation transferred 3,800 acres to PNF as part of a larger land exchange. An additional 1,889 acres of Yavapai Ranch land is covered by a conservation easement, and 42,000 acres is proposed for purchase in five phases, with the first two phases approved and funded. These land transfers remove land from development, constrain water use, and improve public access for recreation.

The Nature Conservancy and Salt River Project have received grant funds from the National Resource Conservation Service. Including the matching funds, there is \$22 million(!) available to purchase conservation easements on private land in the Big Chino.

Nearly 800 acres of the old Del Rio Ranch are now the new Verde Headwaters State Park. It will take some time for the new park to be developed and opened to the public, but it is protected from subdivision.

The Sierra Club has asked the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality to designate the upper Verde as an Outstanding Arizona Water. This designation will prevent degradation of the currently excellent water quality. We are waiting for the bureaucracy to act.

Finally, a coalition of national, state, and local conservation groups is asking Congress to officially designate the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River. This status requires PNF to develop a management plan with community input that will maintain or enhance the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the river, including public recreation. Designation does not constrain private property or water rights. The coalition has gathered very strong support from local government. Governor Hobbs, former Governor Bruce Babbitt, and the Yavapai Apache Nation are enthusiastic supporters. A legislative proposal has been submitted to Senator Kelly.

These efforts will help protect the Verde, but they are not enough. Fundamentally, the upper Verde is now in an extremely fragile and vulnerable condition because groundwater pumping in the Big Chino Valley is depleting the base flow. The elephant in the room is the planned Big Chino pipeline. Groundwater pumping must be controlled to prevent drying the upper Verde in as little as a few decades.

We must act quickly to minimize future disastrous damage to the Verde River by creating a sustainable water future for both humans and wildlife.

I will present the history and status of the Big Chino pipeline on Saturday, Feb. 8. Details are under "Next Event" at cwagaz.org.

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