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'Water is about to get more expensive'

By GILLIAN 'GUS' ANDREWS, The Daily Courier
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The Verde River, which flows more than 170 miles, starts in north-central Arizona and winds down into the Phoenix area, where it empties into the Salt River. In 2020, the Trust for Public Land and the U.S. Forest Service announced the permanent protection of 84 acres on the upper Verde River by adding the land to the Prescott National Forest. (Michael Hannan/Cronkite News, file)



Changes to Colorado River water rights may not directly impact the Quad Cities, but those reductions will still be felt locally. The Big Chino Aquifer, which both Prescott and Prescott Valley have staked claims to, is tied to the headwaters of the Verde River — and Phoenix-area cities and Arizona tribes have rights to Verde River water, too.

Those were among the messages from water law and policy experts at the 2026 State of the Verde Watershed Conference, held last week in Camp Verde. Speakers explained how protecting groundwater, clarifying rights to Verde River water, and supporting tribes in resolving their water issues are crucial to water sustainability. Make sure state agencies like ADEQ and ADWR have enough funding to do their jobs, they also stressed.

Less Colorado could mean more Verde in Phoenix water supply

Recent cuts to Arizona's share of Colorado River water are hitting the Phoenix area like "a gut punch that's going to keep on coming," said Cynthia Campbell, a "semi-retired" water resources attorney who has previously worked for the city of Phoenix and the state. Campbell spoke alongside a panel of four other water policy experts on the first day of the conference. The cuts left cities in the valley trying "to figure out how to continue to meet their current demands" for water, Campbell said.

Sixty percent of Phoenix's water supply comes from the Verde and Salt Rivers, Campbell said. So once Phoenix metro cities get beyond "running around trying to figure out where the next gut punch is coming from" after the recent ruling on Colorado River water allocation, she said she expects that they will turn to the Verde to ensure their water supplies are secured.

"Imagine if you go camping and you have your camper fully stocked... and then one night a bear comes in and he eats half the food," Campbell said. "You're like, I'm still stuck out here... and I gotta go with what I got. That's pretty much where the Cities are right now."

Nobody is suggesting draining the Verde River, Campbell said; that would be "kill(ing) the golden goose." But she said she expected to see more parties from the valley interested in a "reliable" and "resilient" flow from the river.

'Terrible track record' of protecting water

Speaker Joe Trudeau raised concerns about additional demands on the Verde's River's water.

The Verde is partly fed by water from springs between Paulden and Chino Valley. That spring water comes from the Big Chino Aquifer. Prescott and Prescott Valley have bought into the Big Chino Pipeline project, which would pump that water into their municipal systems.

"We now know pretty conclusively that when we drill wells into aquifer areas, and fracture bedrock areas, and pull water out of those wells, that's water that doesn't make it to springs," Trudeau said. That water is referred to as "base flow," meaning what comes up from the ground before rain contributes to the river's flow.

About 15,000 to 17,000 acre feet of water a year flow from springs into the Upper Verde River each year, Trudeau said: basically, "a football field of water 15,000 feet tall."

Legal rights to that water pose a problem, Trudeau said. Added up, Big Chino Pipeline and irrigation claims on that aquifer — plus unregulated so-called "wildcat" wells — mean 18,000 acre-feet of the Upper Verde's water is legally spoken for.

So, he said, those who have rights to the Upper Verde's water could legally pump enough water to dry up the river.

"If we continue to put areas of high growth on top of key aquifer areas or areas of spring recharge and draw water from that area, then the answer to the question 'how can we grow and protect these water resources'... will be we can't," Trudeau said.

"We can no longer continue to just pull water out that is at a direct cost to base flow of streams," he said. When it comes to community growth that protects local water, Trudeau said, "we have a terrible track record."

Development should be planned within towns, water attorney says

Joan Card, a water quality attorney speaking on the same panel, made a case that touched on ballot issues both Prescott and Prescott Valley residents will vote on in November. Mindful water planning means putting drinking water, sewer, and stormwater planning in the hands of towns and cities, Card argued.

"Community management of water can result in better decision-making," Card said, "certainly better planning (and) more reliable infrastructure."

When towns and communities were not involved in planning water, Card said, the state had seen on-site septic systems, poorly-planned stormwater management, and “hundreds of individual wells, thousands of individual wells, exempt from monitoring or regulation, practically.”

Making sure the Verde River watershed is sustainable, Card said, will mean “growing under these government structures.”

‘Where and how’ of growth, forest protections are key to water’

Where and how growth happens has, and will continue to, shape long-term sustainability of the watershed,” Card said.

Trudeau echoed that statement. He noted that managing meadows and trees in the Tonto and Prescott National Forests is a part of ensuring that sustainability. Those natural resources, along with the Salt River Project, were established to provision water for both Prescott and Phoenix.

“We’re in an era of rollbacks of protections on our public lands,” Trudeau said. Establishing the Upper Verde as a “Wild and Scenic River” would help ensure the river keeps flowing, he said, and be a “concrete way we can take a policy step” against those rollbacks.

“With our national forest lands, you know, we the people own those,” he said. “Those are our public lands.” So, he said, they will be important to having “some control” over the security of the watershed.

‘It takes money’ to protect water

Due to these trends, Campbell said in closing, “water is about to get more expensive” in Arizona. She said Arizonans will need to get used to prioritizing paying for water the way they think about paying utility, cell phone, housing, and other bills, as water bills will likely go up.

“It takes money to do the things that we’re talking about,” she said, “whether you’re talking about restoration of forests... advanced, better wastewater treatment, better water treatment, maintaining a river that continues to flow — it all costs money.”

"If we want to have a chance to maintain the lifestyle — whether you were born here and grew up here... and your people have been here since time immemorial, or whether you arrived here five years ago. It is a fact, it is a reality," Campbell said.



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