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Chino, Prescott progress on Big Chino plans

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The [Town of Chino Valley](#) is the first entity in Arizona to get state approval to move groundwater from one basin to another.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources this week approved the importation of 2,893 acre-feet of water annually from the Big Chino Sub-basin south to Chino Valley in the neighboring water-strapped Little Chino Sub-basin, although the state hasn't approved its use for new homes yet.

Also in recent days, the [City of Prescott](#) submitted its application to import 9,571 acre-feet of Big Chino water annually to the Little Chino aquifer, with that number automatically rising to 14,000 acre-feet in the future so the city can meet its statutory requirement to supply water to the Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe.

Future developers who want to use Big Chino groundwater now will have to consider Chino Valley and Prescott uses in their analyses of how their developments would affect the water table, said Sandy Fabritz-Whitney, an assistant director at the Arizona Department of Water Resources.

Roughly estimating that a household uses a third of an acre-foot annually, Chino could serve 964 homes with 2,893 acre-feet and Prescott could serve 3,190 homes with 9,571 acre-feet.

TWO PIPELINES

Right now, Prescott and Prescott Valley are cooperating on one pipeline and Chino Valley is planning to build a separate one at the expense of a Big Chino landowner named Chino Grande LLC.

Chino Grande would get water sale proceeds in return. Chino Grande also is seeking state approval to use nearly 21,000 acre-feet for future homes northwest of Paulden on top of the Big Chino aquifer.

While Prescott and Chino Valley have not talked in public about cooperating on one pipeline, it appears that the [Prescott City Council](#) might be talking about that issue in public Tuesday.

The Prescott council meeting agenda includes "discussion with Global Water on potential partnership for water delivery." The city hasn't provided any back-up materials.

The website for the Phoenix-based Global Water Management LLC, says "Global Water was founded to aggregate and consolidate small- to medium-sized water and wastewater utilities in the southwestern United States."

STATE LAW DESCRIPTION

When the state concluded that the Prescott Active Management Area (mostly the Little Chino Sub-basin) was depleting its groundwater supply in 1999, it started prohibiting the use of Prescott AMA groundwater for population growth.

Since little surface water is available here, municipalities are planning to import the Big Chino groundwater for new growth.

A 1991 state law generally prohibits importing water from one basin to another, but it has several exceptions.

One exception allows Prescott to import as much as 14,000 acre-feet of Big Chino water outright.

A rough, preliminary estimate from the state several years ago actually reduced that amount to 8,717 acre-feet, but Prescott's new application argues it has the right to all 14,000 acre-feet.

Another exception to the 1991 law allows all Prescott AMA municipalities to "retire" historic irrigation uses in the Big Chino and convert them to municipal use in the Little Chino.

That is the section Chino Valley is using for its 2,893 acre-foot request. The town already has purchased or leased enough "historically irrigated acres" to qualify for this use.

CHINO LIMITATIONS

While the Arizona Department of Water Resources concluded Tuesday that Chino Valley has the right to pump 2,893 acre-feet of Big Chino groundwater from its property about five miles northwest of Paulden, that approval has limitations, noted Gerry Wildeman, the state's director of the Prescott AMA.

Right now, Chino can use that groundwater only for existing homes or groundwater recharge projects, she explained. It has no plans to do that.

Chino has submitted a more detailed application for an "Assured Water Supply" designation that would allow it to use the Big Chino water for new homes, but the state hasn't ruled on that application yet. Chino Valley Water Resources Manager Mark Holmes hopes that approval could come as early as the end of November.

Chino is on track to start pumping its water in fewer than two years, and it's working on plans to meet its commitment to a zero impact on the Upper Verde River, Holmes said.

"We believe it's coming together really, really well right now," Holmes said.

Prescott's application includes a request to convert historical irrigation uses to 3,500 acre-feet annually of municipal use, but the council committed in writing two years ago that it won't use that water for new growth, the city's Big Chino Water Ranch Manager Jim Holt noted.

Both the Prescott and Chino Valley applications related to Assured Water Supply require the municipalities to show that the Big Chino water is physically and legally available. The municipalities also must prove they have the financial capability to build their pipelines.

WATER TABLE IMPACTS

Both municipalities had to provide the state with hydrology studies to show their pumping wouldn't drop the water table by 1,000 feet in 100 years.

Chino Valley's analysis concluded that pumping as much as 8,000 acre-feet would drop the water table only 60 feet, Holmes said.

The town used the 8,000 acre-feet number because that's about how much all the Prescott AMA municipalities could use if they converted all the potential Big Chino historical irrigation uses to municipal use, Holmes said.

Chino's hydrology experts also analyzed the impact to the water table five miles east of Chino's well site at Sullivan Lake, near the Verde River headwaters. They concluded that water table would drop 32 feet after 100 years.

The municipalities' potential effect on the flow of the Upper Verde River has concerned some citizens, including downstream users and environmental groups.

Prescott's analysis concluded that, even if it used the maximum 14,000 acre-feet plus another 3,500 acre-feet from retired irrigation uses, the water table under its ranch would drop only 174 feet.

Prescott added in the impact of neighboring Chino Grande's 21,000 acre-feet and concluded the water table would drop 400 feet.

"The city has always believed that a very large volume of water is available in the Big Chino, and this confirmed that," Holt said.

Prescott didn't look at the impact to the Verde River headwaters more than 15 miles away, and state law doesn't require it.

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