



# The Daily Courier

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## Governor wants state to help resolve Big Chino issues

**By Joanna Dodder Nellans**

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Gov. [Janet Napolitano](#) has directed the Arizona Department of Water Resources to try to help resolve conflicts relating to Prescott-area plans to use Big Chino Sub-basin groundwater.

Department of Water Resources Director Herb Guenther said this week that his department and the governor's office have been closely watching the Verde River Basin and Big Chino controversies for about a year.

"The governor was thinking this was kind of a local issue," and "we did not want to get involved in a political fracas," Guenther related.

However, escalating anxieties have prompted state officials to change their minds, he said.

The issue could escalate to a statewide problem and protracted lawsuits, he said. Salt River Project and the Center for Biological Diversity both have threatened court action against Prescott-area communities.

So Guenther and his agency want to try to help the stakeholders come up with a regional solution, he said.

Verde Valley officials have long expressed concerns that Prescott-area plans to use the Big Chino Sub-basin groundwater under a special state law could hurt the [Verde River](#), which is home to endangered species.

Scientists generally agree that the Big Chino supplies about 80 percent of the baseflow for the first 24 miles of the river above Clarkdale, before several tributaries enlarge the flow.

In recent months, Salt River Project has sent a series of letters to the state and Prescott-area municipalities that express concerns about the Big Chino plans and related state rulemaking procedures. Officials at SRP, which supplies the majority of the Phoenix area with its water, say SRP gets about 40 percent of its surface water supplies from the Verde River and the Big Chino portion is important to their users.

The recent SRP letters are part of the reason that the Department of Water Resources is getting involved in the issue, Guenther said.

Prescott and Prescott Valley are working on one pipeline from Prescott's Big Chino ranch, while Chino Valley is planning another pipeline from its property much closer to the river's headwaters.

Guenther said they all should join in only one pipeline, and it should be as far away from the river as possible.

The three communities should complete a written mitigation plan before any pipeline construction begins, Guenther said. Otherwise, they could spend millions of dollars and then face a lawsuit before they get to use the water.

And that mitigation plan should seek to avoid any harm to the river, Guenther said.

He wants to meet with the three local mayors by early March. He said his agency can provide any kind of help they want, from technical assistance to mediation.

Stakeholders such as SRP, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, and conservation groups should be involved in creating the mitigation plan, Guenther said. And the communities should conduct public hearings on the draft plan.

He didn't go so far as to say that all these groups have to sign off on the plan.

"We don't have to sing 'Kum Ba Yah,' but we could at least hum it," Guenther said.

### Mayors glad to talk

The mayors of Prescott, Prescott Valley and Chino Valley all said they welcome the Department of Water Resources' help.

They also say they would prefer just one pipeline, too.

"I think (Guenther) is a very capable and knowledgeable individual," said Prescott Mayor [Jack Wilson](#), who agreed that no pipeline construction should occur before a mitigation plan is complete. "I would welcome his involvement."

Skoog said the department's decision is good news, and Guenther is a "decent and honorable man." Guenther has a long history in Arizona water issues, including work on major water laws in the Legislature.

"We can use as much help as we can possibly get," said Chino Valley Mayor Karen Fann, who said her town is committed to completing a

mitigation plan before any pipeline construction begins.

Wilson said he's ready for that first meeting with Guenther.

"What I'd like to do is get the principals in the room and keep the lawyers out," Wilson added.

### **SRP weighs in**

Dave Roberts, manager of water rights and contracts for the [Salt River Project](#), said he heard about the governor's request for Guenther. "Being a regulator and trying to be I guess a mediator, that's going to be hard to fill both roles," Roberts said.

However, the state agency could be helpful, he said, because it has some people with strong technical and creative skills.

"You work things out by communicating, and that's what we haven't had the last 1.5-2 years," Roberts said, ever since Prescott stopped its stakeholder mitigation meetings.

Roberts said SRP hasn't heard from Prescott or Prescott Valley officials about SRP's latest letter that challenges the constitutionality of the state law that allows Prescott to pump as much as 14,000 acre-feet annually from the Big Chino.

However, he did meet recently with Chino Valley Water Resources Manager Mark Holmes about Holmes' draft proposals for a regional mitigation plan.

Holmes said Chino Valley officials want just one pipeline, and they want it to be farther away from the Verde headwaters than Chino's current proposed site that is about four miles away.

"He spoke some good words," Roberts said. "We'll just see if actions follow."

Roberts' definition of a mitigation plan is the same as Guenther's.

"Mitigation is actually preventing the impact (to the river) from happening," he said.

### **Big Chino not end-all**

Guenther said the Prescott municipalities should not view the Big Chino aquifer as a long-term solution to their water needs.

"Pumping in the upper part of the basin, there's a good chance that they'll get decades of interim use without affecting the baseflow," Guenther said.

However, "If it's being counted on as a permanent supply, then I think there's going to be problems," Guenther said.

Pumping for a century is "not reasonable," Guenther said.

The complicated Big Chino geology is not well understood, and large-scale pumping might impact some kind of artesian pressure, he said.

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