

Not everyone sees San Pedro River as a glass half full

This story is a follow-up to our recent series on water and results from our recent survey.??

By Gentry Braswell??Herald/Review SIERRA VISTA —

Water as a political issue is historically an emotional topic, with far-reaching implications.??

A recent countywide water opinion survey, along with last week's series of articles in the Herald/Review that were inspired by the survey results, were unable to illustrate the full scope of dissent regarding local conservation policy.??

Some who are more critical about those involved with local water policy indicated last week's series of articles reflected attitudes of Upper San Pedro Partnership members to be misleadingly sunny.??

ÒIt was good coverage. It allowed the people on the partnership to try to make their case for all the good things they've done,Ó said local resident Tricia Gerrodette, who represents the National Audubon Society.??

Forgetting the basic reality that the local watershed is finite, all the while becoming entangled in details such as the definition and potential location of aquifer recharge, is a negative tendency of bureaucratic approaches to water conservation, Gerrodette said.??

“The basics are: If you pump more than you recharge, ultimately you will lose the river,” she said.??

Holly Richter, who represents The Nature Conservancy on the partnership’s scientific advisory and review committee, showed accurate data regarding the proximity-to-river recharge studies funded by the partnership and conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey, Gerrodette said.??

“But, that is all it is. It has to be accompanied by something else,” she said.??

Richter reiterated last month that no “magic bullet” exists as a permanent positive solution to questions of water conservation.??

Furthermore, under no circumstances should local authorities consider importing water from elsewhere, Gerrodette said. Such water import from any other water table would not be a sound solution to the local water management problems.??

Whetstone rancher Mike Hayhurst, who represents the Hereford Natural Resource Conservation District on the partnership, expressed similar objections.??

“I don’t agree with an awful lot of what is being done with the Upper San Pedro Partnership,” specifically regarding what he believes is a partnership bias against exempt private wells and the local agriculture industry.??

The partnership is an organization comprising members from the public and private sectors, charged by U.S. Congress with mitigating the current groundwater pumping-to-aquifer recharge deficit.??

Partnership members seem to desire eventual county control of the private wells,

of which rural residents are averse, Hayhurst said. He also sees a double standard in such attacks on private well rights and commercial agriculture while at the same time the city of Sierra Vista unanimously has approved a large-scale neighborhood development plan by Castle & Cooke comprising a cap of no more than 6,959 dwelling units on the city's east side.??

The partnership isn't accomplishing its task, he said.??

At a partnership vote two months ago, Hayhurst said he cast the lone dissenting vote in a 14-1 decision to pipe effluent sewage from Huachuca City, uphill, for treatment and reuse at Fort Huachuca. ??This plan is imminent and the effect will be to transfer water that originated in the Babocomari River drainage area, and ship it away from its home in a costly and literally uphill fashion, Hayhurst said.??

The Babocomari is still a stream with fish in it and everything else, but it's not going to be that way much longer, Hayhurst said. That project makes no sense. There might be a lawsuit over the whole thing.??

Dr. Robin Silver, chairman of the Center for Biological Diversity, watches the San Pedro from his home in Phoenix , and the current management of the San Pedro flares his temper.??

People in Sierra Vista get it. They see the connection, I think. (Fort Huachuca Garrison Commander) Col. Jonathan Hunter was pretty happy because he's been very expressive of late that the community and the future of the fort are interconnected, Silver said regarding the countywide survey results.??

However, local leaders do not get it, Silver said, citing, as did Gerrodette and Hayhurst, Sierra Vista 's recent approval of the 2,000-acre Tribute neighborhood

development.??

The deficit that the partnership is tasked to mitigate is not under control, and won't be by the 2011 goal set by Congress, Silver said.??

ÒThe (local water) topic itself has been inconsistently covered over the years,Ó he said.??

Regardless of the coverage of the issue or the public and private sentiment on Cochise County, Fort Huachuca as the major local funding infrastructure is at risk, Silver said.??

He reiterated that local water is a finite resource.??

ÒWe know there is an end result, and yet the (water) use increases in spite of the inevitable result,Ó he said.??

Silver said he believes a dangerous and misguided past political decision made by the Arizona Department of Water Resources, which contends was a decision largely supported by Cochise County and Sierra Vista at the time, was behind the state's decision not to declare the Upper San Pedro to be an at-risk, federally active water management and conservation area.??

Silver also disagreed with a statement made recently by Sierra Vista Mayor Pro Tem Bob Strain, vice chairman of the partnership's executive committee and the chairman of the partnership's advisory committee, regarding Strain's and the partnership's interpretation of the legal status of the local watershed.??

Strain's assertion that ADWR does not have statutes allowing the city or the

county to regulate water use is a false statement in Silver's interpretation.??

Silver believes the Upper San Pedro area should be categorized federally as an active management and conservation area, and that ADWR's past decision not to declare the Upper San Pedro as such was based on politics and a "legal fiction" in the state's statutory interpretation.??

Silver believes the state's adherence to this "legal fiction" —that groundwater and a river's surface flow, such as that of the San Pedro, bear no interconnection—is in disregard of a higher, federal court's rejection of such a fallacy. The state's "legal fiction" helps allow complicity with the status quo, that is prevented this area from receiving its due active management status, Silver said.??

Furthermore, Silver contends ADWR's legal counsel explains it won't litigate to prevent such things as Castle & Cooke's Tribute development because the state's client, the Bureau of Land Management, will not bring about such litigation.??

Silver said queries to the BLM, which is the governmental entity established as the steward of the San Pedro, are shunted, and such "legal fiction" at the state level is perpetuated by the BLM's inaction, with the effect of perpetuating the status quo management of the river, Silver said.??

Strain is accurate in that the ADWR has not determined the Upper San Pedro to require the active management area classification, which would include more detailed oversight.??

Silver contends Cochise County and Sierra Vista lobbied heavily against ADWR's classification of the Upper San Pedro as an active management area when last the determination was made by the state.??

Historically, "There has been no significant reduction in (groundwater pumping) deficit that hasn't resulted from a court order," Silver said.??

Hayhurst said that while he often agrees with Gerrodette, he feels Silver's trenchant attitude on the issues is counterproductive because it polarizes opinions of the public with regard to local water policy choices.??

Silver's approach "is driving them away from reasonable thinking," Hayhurst said.??

Gerrodette believes people have begun to make the connection between the longevity of Fort Huachuca and the San Pedro River .??She said there appears to be a need to create more awareness, to expound that people's individual water use and conservation attitudes also can affect the river.??

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