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Big Chino tour attracts dozens

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Prescott Valley Water Resources Manager John Munderloh, right, and Prescott resident Tom Atkins, left, debate a point about the plans by Prescott and Prescott Valley to import thousands of acre-feet of water annually from the Big Chino Water Ranch, while other participants of Monday's tour look on. The two municipalities conducted a tour that made several stops, including this one at Sullivan Lake, as well as the water ranch northwest of Paulden.

might not be familiar with the location of the water ranch a chance to get an up-close look.

"We thought we'd create an opportunity for people to get a better sense of what the project is about," said Jim Holt, Water Resources Manager for the [City of Prescott](#).

The tour, which began in Prescott, made stops at the future site for an intermediate pump station near Willow Creek Road and Pioneer Parkway as well as at Sullivan Lake off Highway 89, before taking the trek on Big Chino Road northwest of Paulden.

And indeed, a number of the tour participants said they participated simply to get information.

"I'm neutral," Dave Sundberg, a resident of the Williamson Valley area, said during one of the stops along the tour. "I just wanted to see what this is all about."

But many of the 48 who participated in the tour had obvious strong views on one side of the water pipeline controversy or the other.

Billed as an informational and educational event, a Monday tour of the Paulden-area Big Chino Water Ranch quickly evolved into a debate between opposing water views.

The tone of the event became evident early on, as the large tour bus rolled past a series of protest signs spaced along the 20-mile route on Big Chino Road.

From cars parked alongside the road, protesters held signs aloft that pushed for reconsideration of Prescott and Prescott Valley's plans to import water from the rolling ranchland that sits over the Big Chino sub-basin.

"'Trust me' is not enough," read the first in the series of signs, referring to the assurances by Prescott and Prescott Valley officials that the two entities would not harm the flow of the Verde River.

A later sign asked for a "Mitigation plan now," while another referred to the two municipalities as "Water rustlers."

Local municipal officials say they scheduled the Monday morning tour to give local residents who

For instance, the tour included representatives from the Center for Biological Diversity, which earlier threatened to sue Prescott over the water ranch project. It also included the three local men who protested the 2008 ruling by the Arizona Department of Water Resources that confirmed Prescott's right to pump 8,067 acre-feet of water annually from the Big Chino sub-basin.

On the other hand, the tour also included a number of officials from the [Town of Prescott Valley](#) the City of Prescott.

The debate over differing water views started at Sullivan Lake, when Holt said it was the city's view that no "hydrological connection" existed between the planned wells at the Big Chino Water Ranch and the headwaters of the Verde River, which he said would be 22 miles apart.

But that generated a rebuttal from Gary Beverly, one of the three plaintiffs in the protest of the ADWR ruling on Prescott's use of Big Chino Water.

"I don't understand how you can claim that," Beverly told Holt. "Pretty much every expert except for the one you hired says there is (a hydrological connection)."

Joanne Oellers of the Center for Biological Diversity pressed Holt and Prescott Valley Water Resources Manager John Munderloh about how the municipalities would monitor for effects on the Verde, and what they would do if an obvious impact turned up.

Holt pointed out that the two communities plan to take steps to mitigate possible impacts to the aquifer, such as discontinuing the pumping for irrigation that a lessee is conducting on a portion of the Big Chino Water Ranch land.

But the claims by Munderloh that a mitigation plan was already "on paper" raised more objections from the tour participants.

"We'll just have to agree to disagree," Munderloh said. "I know you don't feel our mitigation plan is sufficient. We do."

Since 2004, Prescott and Prescott Valley have been planning for the well field and 30-mile pipeline necessary to transport water from the Big Chino.