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SAN PEDRO'S GROUNDWATER OK, STATE SAYS

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The upper San Pedro River will not receive additional protection from groundwater pumping, despite claims by environmental groups that wells in nearby communities are robbing the river of its water.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources decided this week that conditions in the San Pedro's upper basin had not declined enough to merit creation of a new Active Management Area, which would have more tightly regulated groundwater use.

Water supplies remain sufficient to meet needs and no evidence exists of ground subsidence or poor water quality caused by overpumping, the department concluded.

Conservationists decried the decision, accusing the department of ignoring the link between groundwater and surface water in a river.

"This is a sad day for the San Pedro and a great victory for Sierra Vista and Benson developers," said Robin Silver, who monitors the San Pedro for the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity. He said "it is a lie" to say that the basin is not in need of better groundwater regulation.

Silver and others say excessive groundwater use in growing communities along the San Pedro has lowered the water table and virtually cut off the under-

ground flow of water into the river. In some areas, the river's base flow vanishes completely during dry times of the year.

State officials acknowledge a drop in water levels, but say losses have slowed. A study of the basin found that 20 million to 26 million acre-feet of groundwater remain in storage.

Agricultural use of water in the basin has dropped by 45 percent, the study found, even as municipal demand has climbed steadily. Total water use in the basin was 31,100 acre-feet in 2002 and is projected to reach about 40,000 acre-feet in 2030.

An acre-foot of water is 325,851 gallons, enough to serve one or two households for one year.

The study found no evidence of subsidence or fissures created by emptying aquifers. While there were instances of contaminated water, the use of groundwater is not contributing to a decline in water quality.

Department Director Herb Guenther, while rejecting an Active Management Area designation, issued several recommendations for the river basin, including:

- * Continued monitoring of groundwater levels.

- * More research into the basin's hydrology and riparian needs.

- * Study of other management options, including well metering and reporting, rules on the spacing of wells and alternative water sources.

Currently, there are five groundwater management areas in the state, where special rules apply to the use of wells. Those areas are in Maricopa, Pima, Pinal and Santa Cruz counties and the Prescott area of Yavapai County.

Environmental groups have been fighting to protect the San Pedro from overuse for years, arguing that growth in Sierra Vista and near the Army's Fort Huachuca have severely altered the river's ecosystem. The groups have won several court cases using the Endangered Species Act.

The San Pedro, which flows northward from Mexico to its confluence with the Gila River, is the last un-dammed river in Arizona. It is home to endangered and threatened species such as the jaguar, the Mexican spotted owl, the pygmy owl and the Huachuca water umbel.