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Sharp rise in Huachuca jobs triggers new water-use study

By: **TONY DAVIS**
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The largest job increase at Fort Huachuca in 25 years is sparking a new study of whether the fort will dry up the San Pedro River.

The increase — which the fort reported this week to the Arizona Daily Star for the upcoming Star 200 special section — stems from a boost in intelligence students needed for the Iraqi war and the global war on terrorism, said Tanja Linton, a fort spokeswoman. The Star 200 is an annual survey of Southern Arizona's biggest employers.

At the same time, the fort announced the new study of the environmental issues.

The study will look in particular at whether more jobs on the base could jeopardize the existence of the endangered Southwestern willow flycatcher and the Huachuca water umbel, which depend on the river and its trees and shrubs.

A fort official said Wednesday that he could not predict what conservation measures the post will take to accommodate the arrival of 848 new workers between Oct. 1, 2004, and Sept. 30, 2005.

Sierra Vista City Manager Chuck Potucek, however, said that he expects additional efforts to conserve

water, increase artificial recharge programs and other steps to reduce the area's longstanding record of pumping more groundwater than is replaced.

Environmentalists hope that the new study of the fort's operations — the third since 1999 — will lead to cutbacks in water use, growth controls or other measures to reduce the area's ground-water pumping deficit.

In particular, environmentalists say Fort Huachuca's striking successes in on-base water conservation now must be extended to areas outside the base in and near Sierra Vista, where up to 30 percent of the fort's employees live.

Last month, the fort announced that its January 2006 water use of about 31.2 million gallons was:

- Down 8.6 percent from January 2005.
- 39.7 percent less than its 24-year January average.
- The lowest January pumping figure in at least 24 years.

The fort has grown by 2,169 employees since the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service studied its operations in 2002 and required water-saving measures.

As of that year, the fort said it ac-

counted for about 54 percent of the Sierra Vista area's water use.

The increase in employees since 2002 exceeds what was allowed by the wildlife service at that time, Linton said. That's why the new study is needed.

There's a question of whether the fort has enough flexibility to perform its vital missions while compensating for their effects on the river, said Col. Jonathan Hunter, the fort's garrison commander.

"We're not just saying we want to grow — we want to have the flexibility to increase our missions and at the same time mitigate our effects," Hunter said. "Those two are not mutually exclusive."

For Robin Silver, a Phoenix environmentalist who has filed several suits over the years to force water cutbacks or other restrictions on the fort's operations, the new study represents a victory for the San Pedro. His group, the Center for Biological Diversity, had filed suit last March to force the fort and the wildlife service to conduct the new study.

Acknowledging the fort has done a good job conserving water, Silver contended Wednesday that the fort has "maxed out" on conservation it can do while growth continues and still prevent overpumping.

“Waterless urinals can only go so far,” Silver said. “They have to make up the ground-water deficit. As long as they grow, it’s increasing.”

The fort bans outdoor watering except two months a year, when it’s allowed two hours a day and two days a week. Artificial turf has replaced grass at its athletic fields, base homes have low-flow toilets, and waterless urinals have been installed at many fort buildings. The only golf course gets treated sewage effluent.

The city of Sierra Vista also has reduced its total water use slightly in the past year and its per-person use more significantly, Potucek said. “We’re just going to have to do what we need to help the fort,” Potucek said.

But Tricia Gerodette of the Huachuca Audubon Society predicted that the new study will only increase the pressures on the region to import water — which is now being studied separately by a regional agency.

“That is the less-painful way of going and allows growth to occur practically unabated,” she said.

Fort Huachuca total full-time-equivalent jobs:

- 2006: 13,098
- 2005: 12,250
- 2000: 11,140
- 1995: 11,242
- 1990: 12,005
- 1985: 10,906
- 1981: 11,065

Source: Star 200 job data, supplied by the fort and compiled annually by the Arizona Daily Star