

SRP blocking plans to sap Verde water

Yavapai County communities warned about well projects

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Salt River Project has demanded promises from three Yavapai County communities that their plans to import groundwater from a regional aquifer won't suck Phoenix-bound surface water from Verde River.

The utility says it will sue, if necessary, to prevent permanent damage to the Verde, a significant source of water for Valley communities. The river depends on flows from Big Chino Aquifer, an underground store of water targeted for the import plan.

The threat of a court battle appears to have nudged the three communities - Prescott, Prescott Valley and Chino Valley - to consider changes to their plans, which included multiple well sites and two delivery pipelines.

The need for more water in the fast-growing rural areas won't change, which is why SRP insists it must protect its interests and the river even at the cost of a local water project.

"You might say we've turned the heat up," said John Sullivan, SRP's associate general manager. "We'd like to work something out with them, but it won't be easy. We want to sit down and find a solution."

In late 2004, Prescott and Prescott Valley bought a ranch on Big Chino and announced plans to tap its

groundwater rights and build a 30-mile pipeline to import the water. The two communities needed another source of water.

Last year, Chino Valley approved its own proposal to drill into the aquifer and build a shorter pipeline with the help of a private developer. Chino Valley also bought ranchland to acquire the water rights.

SRP officials long had feared the spread of wells on Big Chino Aquifer, which supplies as much as 80 percent of the water that flows in the upper Verde River. Tempe-based SRP holds the rights to virtually the entire flow of the Verde, which fills Horseshoe and Bartlett lakes northeast of the Valley.

Environmental groups have sided with SRP and have threatened to sue over the pipeline plan. The groups cite a string of studies that predict a dire future for the Verde if too much groundwater is pumped.

A profusion of wells could drain long stretches of the river's upper 24 miles, wiping out habitat for native fish and birds.

"We want some assurances that what they're planning won't endanger the river," said Michelle Harrington, rivers-conservation manager for the Center for Biological Diversity.

"So far, what we've gotten from both Chino Valley and Prescott are

promises that they'll protect the river, but no indication of what that might be."

Adjusting plans

Chino Valley tried to set itself apart last year by including in its proposal measures meant to protect the headwaters.

Town officials said that none of the water pumped from Big Chino could be used outdoors and that effluent from indoor use would be treated and recharged into the aquifer.

"We understand there's a price for importing water," said Mark Holmes, the town's water-resources manager. "We want to make sure we pay that price. We don't want any impacts to the river."

The town this week began discussions with Prescott and Prescott Valley to build a regional pipeline. The plan would let Chino Valley abandon a well site that sat less than five miles from the Verde's start and drill at a site more than 20 miles to the northwest. A hydrologist hired by SRP to study Chino Valley's plan said that a well drilled so close to the headwaters could reduce the river's flow in as few as 10 to 20 years.

Moving the wells farther away would reduce the immediate damage and give the communities time to develop a recharge plan.

Holmes said Chino Valley could start construction on its project as early as this summer and wants to install pipes big enough to handle water for all three communities.

Prescott Mayor Jack Wilson would confirm only that he met with the mayors of the other two communities to discuss regional cooperation, but he affirmed his commitment to protect the Verde.

“Before we pump, we have to have a mitigation plan,” he said. “We have to sit down with the parties that are waving lawsuits in front of us.

“We’ve got the legal right to that water, but we have to consider what is the right thing to do.”

Holmes said a lawsuit could worsen the situation by leaving Big Chino vulnerable to thousands of unregulated wells.

Caution flags

SRP officials acknowledge the threat of small, private wells, which ultimately could draw more water from Big Chino than the two pipeline projects. That’s one reason the utility wants the three communities to enact specific and enforceable measures.

The measures could include recharging water into the aquifer or importing it.

So far, the communities have pledged to protect the river but have proposed few concrete ideas to monitor changes to groundwater or to repair damage.

Chino Valley’s accelerated timetable raised more red flags for SRP and environmental groups, who don’t want the drilling rigs to turn with the Verde still unprotected.

Once pumping starts and the water levels begin to drop, recovery will take decades, said Greg Kornrumpf, SRP’s senior water-rights analyst.

“We can’t wait until there’s an impact because, by then, it’s too late,” he said.