'Water Grab' Could Threaten Endangered River

by Megan Tady

As water-driven municipalities in Arizona prepare to siphon off groundwater that feeds the Verde River, activists say the well will imperil the already endangered river.

Aug. 22 – The river was named the Verde, or "green," for a reason – meandering through arid land in central Arizona, the waterway has carved out a contrasting corridor of vegetation and created an oasis for wildlife.

But the river's name may not be fitting for long. The City of Prescott and Town of Prescott Valley have plans to pump groundwater from the aquifer that feeds the river and pipe it 30 miles away to thirsty residents. The proposed "water ranch" would supply the municipalities with more than 4 billion gallons of water per year.

Michelle Harrington, river program director for the Center for Biological Diversity, predicts the well's effect on the river will be like a "straw drawing the water levels down."

Calling it a "horrendous water grab," the Center launched a "Save the Verde" campaign this month to protect one of Arizona's last continuously flowing rivers, a stretch of which has been designated "wild and scenic" by the federal National Park Services. The Verde was also among the top ten most endangered rivers in a 2006 ranking by American Rivers, a conservation organization.

The Center, along with other environmental groups, is concerned that the "water ranch" will imperil the Verde, endanger already-struggling wildlife and affect communities that rely on the river downstream. Additionally, critics say the plan is shortsighted and fails to aggressively tackle water conservation and problems associated with population growth.

"There aren't a lot of rivers that are still functioning," said Sandy Bahr, of the Grand Canyon chapter of Sierra Club. "Here's a river that is, and it's important that we keep it that way."

A 1999 US Geological Survey (USGS) found that 80 percent of the first 24-mile stretch of the Verde River is supplied by interconnected aquifers in the Big Chino Valley, including the Big Chino Aquifer, from which the proposed well would pump water. Critics say this evidence alone should be enough to prevent the cities from building the water ranch.

But James Holt, project manger for Prescott's water ranch, told *The NewStandard*, "Up to this point in time, there have been no scientific studies that have demonstrated a direct, appreciable or even a proportional reduction in the flow of the river as a result of groundwater pumping from the Big Chino water ranch."

"We believe that we are moving forward in a thoughtful, deliberate fashion," Holt said.

When pressed further, Holt admitted that so far, no studies have been designed to analyze groundwater pumping impacts.

Holt's reassurances have not calmed some activists' fears, and if the cities push forward, Arizona's water laws will leave opponents of the plan with little recourse. Unlike most states, Arizona administers surface water and groundwater separately. While the Geological Survey's findings show a connection between the groundwater stored at the aquifer and the surface water of the river, this connection is not legally recognized by the state.

"That separation in the law makes it very difficult to protect rivers from groundwater pumping," Bahr said.

In fact, depleting rivers through groundwater pumping is nothing new in Arizona. The Santa Cruz River, which once flowed through Tucson, is almost entirely dry because of excessive groundwater pumping.Additionally, the San Pedro River, one of the last dam-free rivers in the Southwest, is slowly disappearing because of overdrafts of groundwater.

Despite these warnings, the municipalities are not backing down on the water ranch.

Bahr described local leaders' mindset as "that's the way it is and that's the way it's going to have to be; if it affects the rivers, so be it."

Yavapai County, which encompasses Prescott and Prescott Valley, is one of the fastest-growing rural counties in the state. Prescott, with a current population of 40,000, is expected to grow by 15,000 residents over the next 20 years.

Both Harrington and Bahr said it is crucial that cities and lawmakers in Arizona take a more sustainable approach to growth management and water use.

Bahr said she would like the state legislature to force cities to deny approval of a subdivision if it does not have an adequate water supply of its own. "This doesn't take care of the rivers necessarily, but it starts to take care of the problem of just irresponsibly planning subdivisions without any idea of where the water will come from," she said.

Bahr would also like to see restrictions placed on groundwater pumping that would significantly affect the flow of rivers.

Harrington added that other conservation measures could include rebates on low-flush toilets and water-conserving appliances and a requirement that all pools have covers to limit evaporation.

Holt said the city of Prescott is already taking water conservation measures, including outdoor watering restrictions; the city also hired its first full-time water conservation coordinator in January.

Most importantly, said Harrington, people need to change their mindset about water.

"People have the mentality that as long as you can draw it out of the ground, you can just keep using it," Harrington said. "We've been using water as though there's an unlimited source, and it's catching up with us."