

Thursday, March 1, 2007

Citizens express concerns about water coalition projects

by JOANNA DODDER
THE DAILY COURIER

PRESCOTT – For the second Upper Verde River Watershed Protection Coalition meeting in a row, chair and Chino Valley Mayor Karen Fann urged people in the audience to do a better job of cooperating on the coalition's plans to help the river.

Members of local citizens water groups and environmental groups continue to express numerous concerns about the coalition's proposed projects to increase the amount of precipitation that recharges into the Big Chino aquifer. The aquifer is the main source of water for the upper Verde River.

Yavapai County and the municipalities of Prescott, Prescott Valley, Chino Valley and Dewey-Humboldt formed the coalition this past year to protect the Upper Verde River flows.

Howard Mechanic of the local Citizens Water Advocacy Group questioned Yavapai County Supervisor Carol Springer's previous comments about the coalition's purpose.

Springer reiterated Wednesday that the coalition hopes its projects will prevent any river flow reduction when Prescott and Prescott Valley start piping as much as 8,700 acre-feet of Big Chino groundwater south to their depleted Little Chino aquifer each year. Studies have shown that the Big Chino supplies at least 80 percent of

the flow of the upper river, which is home to endangered species.

"I thought we were here to protect the Upper Verde, not to protect the pipeline," Mechanic said.

He said he liked the planned projects to retain more runoff in the Big Chino, but he urged the coalition also to examine how to reduce demand for Big Chino groundwater, especially in light of proposed large subdivisions there.

The project ideas to supplement Upper Verde groundwater are buying/protecting land where major aquifer recharge occurs, water conservation programs, recharging wastewater into the two groundwater aquifers, removing vegetation in areas overgrown after decades of wildfire suppression, installing groundwater monitoring equipment, and building flood detention structures.

Springer said she liked the latter idea best. She'd prefer to move ahead on a few projects instead of spending \$600,000 over the next three years to hire someone to study the feasibility of various projects.

The coalition asked its staff to prioritize the projects and estimate staff time needs for discussion at the March meeting.

Since the January coalition meeting, the county Board of Supervisors and all but one of the city councils have

agreed to appropriations adding up to \$200,000 for the first year of project analysis.

Prescott Mayor Rowle Simmons apologized for his council not getting the item on its agenda yet, and said it will be on the Tuesday agenda.

People in the audience urged the coalition to work on mitigation before proceeding with the Big Chino pipeline. Prescott already bought a Big Chino ranch and has hired consultants to design the pipeline.

Joanne Oellers said the coalition is putting the "cart before the horse." She's a member of the Center for Biological Diversity, which has threatened to sue to stop the pipeline construction.

Ashley Fine agreed, saying the coalition first needs to conduct an environmental impact study, write up a mitigation plan, and seek an "incidental taking" permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Such permits allow applicants to harm wildlife as long as they create habitat conservation plans to reduce the impacts as much as possible.

Citizens Water Advisory Group member Ken Janeczek urged the coalition to consider getting in on a feasibility study of a Colorado River pipeline, while Tom Steele suggested supporting a California desalination plant in exchange for some of that state's Colorado River water.