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Feds urge regional plan to avoid hurting Verde species

by JOANNA DODDER
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PRESCOTT - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials Wednesday encouraged a Verde River Basin-wide approach to preserving the natural habitat.

John Nystedt and Brenda Smith of the Fish and Wildlife Service talked to the Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee Wednesday about the agency's Habitat Conservation Plans.

The officials repeatedly have urged the municipalities of Prescott and Prescott Valley to work with them on a Habitat Conservation Plan before carrying out their plan to pump Big Chino Sub-basin groundwater south to their depleted Little Chino Sub-basin. Federal studies have concluded that Big Chino supplies at least 80 percent of the baseflow to the Upper Verde.

Such a Habitat Conservation Plan would include a mitigation plan to avoid damaging endangered species habitat in and along the Upper Verde River.

A basin-wide Habitat Conservation Plan would be even better, Smith said in response to a question from water committee member Jane



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Federal officials are urging local governments to create a regional Habitat Conservation Plan to protect species that depend on the Verde River. Greg Kornrumpf, right, Senior Analyst of Water Rights and Contracts with SRP, leads a hike for the Big Chino Ranch mitigation group Thursday, Sept. 15, 2005, along the Verde River near Stillman Lake in Chino Valley.

Moore, a Jerome City Council member.

Smith noted that Pima County already is creating a Habitat Conservation Plan for that entire county.

And the Salt River Project's new draft Habitat Conservation Plan for its Verde River reservoirs will go out for public comment Friday in the National Register.

Prescott officials used to conduct periodic "stakeholder" meetings about the Big Chino pipeline plan that included Fish and Wildlife

representatives, but those haven't taken place for at least a year.

They stopped while Prescott works on water monitoring plans that came out of those meetings, said Jim Holt, Prescott's Big Chino Water Ranch manager, after Wednesday's presentation.

Holt and Prescott Valley Water Resources Manager John Munderloh said the municipalities haven't decided yet whether to enact federal Habitat Conservation Plans.

Chino Valley Water Resources Manager Mark Holmes said Chino

officials recently met with Fish and Wildlife officials to discuss Habitat Conservation Plans, but the town hasn't decided whether to participate in such a plan, either. Chino Valley recently announced that it would build its own Big Chino pipeline.

Habitat Conservation Plans would prevent the local municipalities from violating the Endangered Species Act by "taking" endangered species that depend on the Upper Verde River.

Otherwise, "there is a possibility that a 'taking' could occur," Smith said.

The plans would not prevent others from suing the local municipalities to stop the Big Chino groundwater

pumping, but a judge would have a harder time ruling against the municipalities, Smith said in response to a question during the public meeting from water committee member Doug Von Gausig, Clarkdale's mayor.

The Center for Biological Diversity has threatened to sue Prescott to stop its Big Chino groundwater pumping, and center officials have urged Prescott to write up a Habitat Conservation Plan to avoid the potential for a lawsuit.

The meaning of "taking" is broad, Nystedt said. It means people cannot harm endangered species by taking away their habitat, and they cannot harass endangered species by disrupting their normal behavior in a way that's likely to hurt them.

But since 1982, the federal government has allowed "incidental taking" if people first obtain a Habitat Conservation Plan and permit. The incidental taking still can't reduce the chance of species-wide survival.

Habitat Conservation Plans help foster regional, public planning and reduce conflict, Nystedt said. They identify potential impacts of proposed activities and find ways to avoid those impacts.

Federal grants are available to help pay for the plans and even buy land for conservation, Smith said.