

Competing Verde uses become crystal clear at forum

By Joanna Dodder Nellans
THE DAILY COURIER

The audience at a Verde Watershed issues forum got a bird's-eye view of competing water needs Friday.

After a Salt River Project official detailed SRP's efforts to protect its Verde surface water rights, a Prescott Valley official countered that its current and future impact on the river is "tiny," and pointed out how much more the Phoenix area uses.

"Phoenix grows a Prescott AMA (Active Management Area) every year," Prescott Valley Water Resources Manager John Munderloh said, referring to the population growth of SRP's service area compared to the Prescott tri-city region.

Other presentations emphasized the water needs of the river, its riparian area and the wildlife they support. Unlike human needs, those needs have no protection under state water laws, Cottonwood Mayor Diane Joens noted.

The 140-mile-long Verde River is home to more non-native fish species (18) than native (eight),

said Brenda Smith of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Federal law classifies at least one fish and one bird species as threatened or endangered.

Prescott AMA communities might have a special right to use neighboring Big Chino Sub-basin groundwater under state law, "but that does not authorize the destruction of the Verde River, its habitat or the endangered or threatened species," said Joanne Oellers of the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Big Chino is the major source of water for the first 24 miles of the Verde River.

A wide variety of expert speakers were part of Friday's forum that asked, "The Verde River Ecosystem: Are Growth and Conservation Mutually Exclusive?"

The forum kicked off with background on the issues and statistics from Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee Coordinator John Rasmussen and Northern Arizona University scientist Abe Springer.

One of the major issues is how to avoid reducing the flow of the Upper Verde River, which depends heavily on groundwater just like the Prescott AMA communities.

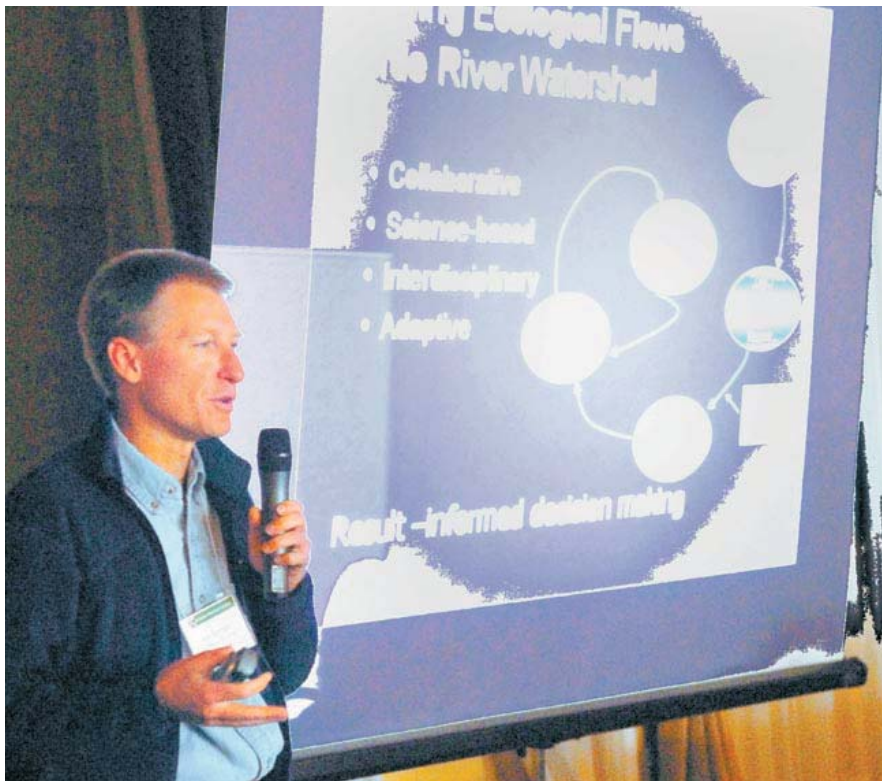
The river could already be six or seven miles shorter than it was historically, Springer said.

"Del Rio Springs could have been the perennial start of the river," but it has experienced a "significant decline over the last 100 years," Springer said.

The Arizona Riparian Council organized the forum as part of its annual meeting in Prescott.

Both Joens and Munderloh said their municipalities have made major strides in water conservation after purchasing private water companies.

But SRP's Greg Kornrumpf said numerous communities in the Verde Watershed above Phoenix have caused concerns for SRP, which is one of the largest water providers in the state and gets 40 percent of its surface water from its senior water rights on the Verde.



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Abe Springer, associate professor with Northern Arizona University's Geology Department, speaks Friday at a Verde River forum in Prescott.

Chino Valley, for example, has applied for state permission to pump Big Chino groundwater four miles above the river's headwaters.

"That was fairly alarming to SRP," Kornrumpf said. He also criticized the accuracy of the science in the application, causing a subcontractor to stand up and defend the technical work.

Kornrumpf then proceeded to a list of concerns about Middle Verde wells, which have grown

from about 190 in 1950 to more than 7,000 today. Many of those Verde Valley wells actually are using surface water because they are pumping out of the river's subflow zone, he said.

Yet the Gila adjudication drags on and on as more and more wells go in, he said.

SRP has filed court actions against some of the larger wells along the river when owners didn't work with SRP to mitigate concerns, he noted.

"We have a responsibility to our shareholders to protect their rights," Kornrumpf said.

Munderloh pointed out how Phoenix uses 2.3 million acre-feet of water annually compared to Prescott's 25,000 af, and how the average Phoenix resident uses 515 gallons daily compared to 180 gallons in Prescott.

Prescott Valley's recent auction of its recycled wastewater set a local price of \$24,650/af while the going rate in Phoenix is only about \$1,500/af because of its access to the Central Arizona Project's Colorado River water that the federal government subsidized, Munderloh added.

After pointing out all the conservation measures Prescott and Prescott Valley plan to initiate at the Big Chino Water Ranch, Munderloh noted that the water in the Upper Verde makes up only about 3 percent of the Verde River by the time it reaches Phoenix.

"The Upper Verde River is not a significant source of supply for the Verde Valley or Phoenix," he said.

Judging by Kornrumpf's comments, SRP obviously disagrees.