

Verde talk draws crowd

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A panel of experts on local water issues drew hundreds of listeners Friday to a Prescott-area conference.

The audience heard a primer about the Verde Watershed ecosystem, as well as some of the political issues surrounding it.

Panelists included Abe Springer, associate professor of geology at [Northern Arizona University](#); Chuck Paradzick, wildlife biologist for the [Salt River Project](#); Carol Springer, Yavapai County Board of Supervisors chair; Dan Campbell, Verde Program director for The Nature Conservancy; Michael Byrd, executive director of Prescott Creeks; and Michelle Harrington, rivers conservation manager for the Center for Biological Diversity.

Paradzick noted how the Salt River Project has spent \$24 million to create two Habitat Conservation Plans on the Verde and Salt river systems, with the help of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

He reiterated past SRP comments by encouraging Prescott-area communities also to create mitigation plans before pumping Big Chino Sub-basin water south to supplement their overtaxed supplies.

Scientists generally agree that the Big Chino supplies about 80 percent of the baseflow for the first 24 miles of the Verde River, which often depends entirely on groundwater springs.

"The relationship between surface water and groundwater is going to be an issue from here on out," Paradzick said.

SRP gets 40 percent of its surface water supplies from the [Verde River](#).

Carol Springer agreed that Arizona's bifurcated water laws, which do not recognize the connection between groundwater and surface water, are creating conflict.

She noted that Prescott-area residents depend totally on groundwater.

The Prescott-area communities would use a maximum of 25,000 acre-feet of Big Chino groundwater each year, she said.

Then she pointed out that the Salt River Project just released more than that amount from its swollen reservoirs all at once. SRP officials later said they released 29,600 acre-feet between Jan. 27 and Feb. 2.

"You can see why there is, say, some animosity" between Prescott-area communities and SRP, Springer said after noting those uses.

It is not easy for elected officials to balance competing demands, Springer added.

"Part of the problem is ... a certain amount of distrust," she said.

Harrington cited her group's efforts to help the river with its "Save the Verde" campaign and its website at www.savetheverde.org. The group has proclaimed April 12-20 Verde River Week.

She joined the call for a comprehensive mitigation plan from the three Prescott-area communities, before they start building Big Chino pipelines. The Center for Biological Diversity has threatened to sue Prescott over the issue.

She listed some things that the Center does not consider mitigation, including monitoring of groundwater levels or moving Big Chino well sites farther away from the river as Prescott and Prescott Valley did.

That just delays the impacts to the river, she said.

Abe Springer talked about how northern Arizona has been in the grips of a drought for 13 years now. In 2002, half of the 150 Verde system springs that scientists visited were dry, although they are better now.

He said a U.S. Geological Survey computer model of regional underground water systems and a study about how plants and animals could react to river water losses, both due this year, should help decision-makers.

Campbell extolled the special nature of the Verde River, as well as its commonality with other rivers.

"What befalls the Verde River is likely to befall every river in the Southwest," Campbell said.

He noted that Arizona is home to 135 species that do not live anywhere else, with the fourth-highest biodiversity of any state.

Yet Arizona also ranks seventh in species at risk, and 86 percent of its native fish are in peril - the worst percentage in the country.

Eighty-five percent of the Verde Watershed's wildlife depends on the river and its tributaries, he added.

The Nature Conservancy wants to see more of the river's land under public ownership, and to restore native fish in the upper river. It also wants Prescott communities to mitigate any impacts to the river. The Conservancy recently bought the land encompassing the Upper Verde springs.

Byrd talked about his group's effort to restore the 126-acre Watson Woods, which he called the best remaining riparian area in the region. The woods are just above Watson Lake in Prescott, and Prescott Creeks holds a city lease on it.

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