

Basin Partnership continues

Local entities won't join
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The Verde River Basin Partnership will gather in Prescott Friday for the first time after agreeing on an oversight committee structure, but Prescott-area officials representing the basin's largest population center don't plan to attend.

Despite several revisions to the oversight group's structure and presentations to all three councils of the Prescott region in recent weeks, Prescott-area municipalities don't like the structure and refuse to attend the meetings. The next one starts at 2 p.m. Friday at Prescott College's Crossroads Center, 220 Grove Ave.

"Right now, they see the partnership somehow as a threat to them, but they haven't really looked at the things that might benefit them," said Clarkdale Mayor Doug Von Gausig, who personally attended Prescott-area council meetings recently to urge them to join the partnership.

The perceived threat seems to be the possibility that the partnership might produce water studies that conclude that pumping groundwater from the Big Chino Sub-basin would diminish the flow of the Verde River, Von Gausig said.

The Prescott-area municipalities plan to supplement their own depleted groundwater supplies with Big Chino water from the north. U.S. Geological Survey studies have concluded that the Big Chino supplies at least 80 percent of the flow of the Upper Verde River.

But Congressional legislation charges the partnership with conducting studies that will be the backbone of a mitigation plan that Prescott will need to show how it will avoid damaging the river, Von Gausig said. The Congressional Budget Office estimates those studies will cost \$8 million, and the federal government is likely to cover most of the cost if the partnership conducts the studies, he noted.

A good mitigation plan will help Prescott's case in any future court battles over the Big Chino, Von Gausig added. The Center for Biological Diversity has long threatened to sue Prescott, citing the endangered species and other environmental values of the river.

Sen. John McCain called for the creation of the partnership in Congressional legislation late last year as a way to promote broadbased planning in the 6,622- square-mile watershed that is home to about 200,000 people in four counties. The legislation gives only vague direction about membership, but calls for a specific list of watershed studies.

VERDE RIVER BASIN PARTNERSHIP OVERSIGHT GROUP VOTING STRUCTURE	UPPER SAN PEDRO PARTNERSHIP OVERSIGHT GROUP VOTING STRUCTURE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 4 counties• 10 municipalities• 5 state agencies• 6 federal agencies• 2 American Indian tribes• 3 water providers• 1 agricultural caucus• 1 economic development caucus• 1 national environmental groups caucus• 1 grassroots environmental groups caucus• 1 unincorporated/ community water interests caucus	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 1 county (3 votes)• 4 municipalities (Sierra Vista gets 3 votes)• 3 state agencies• 7 federal agencies• 1 water provider/ developer• 1 agricultural caucus (Natural Resource Conservation District)• 2 environmental groups



AP file photo

The Verde River Basin Partnership aims to conduct studies about the water resources in the basin including its surface water centerpiece, the Verde River. It's shown here at Camp Verde.

BIG CHINO ISSUE

The partnership formation effort has been flawed from its start in February, said Chino Valley Mayor Karen Fann, who chairs the Upper Verde River Watershed Protection Coalition.

At that February meeting that the non-partisan Verde Watershed Association organized, Prescott-area officials heard more than one citizen member of local water groups say the partnership would be their big chance to stop the Prescott-area communities from pumping Big Chino water, Fann recalled.

"That immediately set the tone," she said.

Prescott Valley Water Resources Manager John Munderloh said he felt ignored in a breakout group at the February partnership meeting. His comments never made the group's list of suggestions.

One way to appease Prescott-area fears would be to leave the Big Chino out of the partnership's work, Fann said. The Big Chino represents about one-third of the watershed.

Fann fears that the partnership could vote to oppose the Prescott area's use of Big Chino water, even though that would require many of the partnership's 11 state and federal agencies to join in that vote. That's not likely, said Tom Whitmer, manager of statewide water planning for the Arizona Department of Water Resources. State and federal officials often avoid political votes on the San Pedro Partnership, of which he is a member, he said.

State law gives Prescott the unique right to use water from its neighboring Big Chino Sub-basin, and all of the Verde Valley members of the Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee have publicly acknowledged that right.

The Prescott-area communities also are concerned about how much the partnership would get into water management issues, Munderloh said. While the partnership's enabling legislation doesn't list specific management duties, it does use the word "management" several times.

MAJORITY ISSUE

Ever since that February partnership meeting, the Prescott-area communities of Prescott, Prescott Valley, Chino Valley and Dewey-Humboldt have demanded that elected officials represent a majority of the partnership's oversight group. They explained that they are talking about locally elected officials, not those representing state and federal governments. They have refused to attend most partnership meetings.

Without Prescott-area participation, the partnership agreed in November on how to structure its oversight group. Of its 35 members, 16 represent local governments while only three represent national and local environmental groups as well as community water interests.

"I thought that was a huge concession," said Greg Kornrumpf of the Salt River Project, which gets one vote. "I frankly think that the other stakeholders bent over backwards to try to accommodate Prescott's wishes."

The latest Prescott-area proposal calls for extra seats from the Prescott area, since its population represents about half of the basin's population.

Prescott and Prescott Valley should get extra votes, said Prescott City Council Member Bob Roecker, who represents the city on the Yavapai County Water Advisory Committee. Much of Prescott Valley, however, sits in the Agua Fria River Basin. Dewey-Humboldt is entirely within the Agua Fria.

"The population argument comes with its own risks," Kornrumpf said. He noted that SRP provides water to about 1.75 million Phoenix-area residents and gets about 30 percent of its water from the Verde River.

Therefore, it is valid to argue that SRP should get more votes, although it's not asking for that, Kornrumpf said.

An even larger population statistic comes from Arizona NEMO, an educational outreach program. Its study of the Verde River Basin calculates that the U.S. Forest Service owns 56 percent of the watershed. The owners of the forestlands are the 300 million residents of the United States.

Munderloh called those population arguments “outlandish.”

The population argument in general just isn’t valid, Kornrumpf said.

“You’ve got to take the politics out of it to get the studies done, because everybody’s fearful of the results,” Kornrumpf said.

SAN PEDRO MODEL

The Prescott area’s latest proposal calls for a structure tightly based on the Upper San Pedro Partnership in southeastern Arizona, since McCain has repeatedly referred to it as a model. That group gives the lone county in the watershed three votes, and the largest city of Sierra Vista three votes.

Ironically, however, only nine of the 24 San Pedro group members represent locally elected bodies, while 16 of the Verde group’s 35 members fit that description.

Other misleading statements abound from both sides, even in written documents such as the Power-Point presentation that Von Gausig used in his discussion with the Prescott-area councils, and the counterpoint documents that the Prescott-area governments produced.

For example, Von Gausig’s PowerPoint presentation quotes San Pedro officials as stating that Cochise County and Sierra Vista get extra votes because of their monetary contributions. However, that group’s executive director, Carol Sanger, said the extra votes are there because of the extra population.

Munderloh’s counterpoint document quotes the Verde Partnership’s charter in an effort to prove that the Verde Partnership seeks to impose water management policies on its members. However, the charter is quoting McCain’s legislation almost verbatim.

In his PowerPoint presentation that preceded Von Gausig’s at the Chino Valley Town Council meeting recently, CV Water Resources Manager Mark Holmes incorrectly quoted Arizona Department of Water Resources Director Herb Guenther.

Holmes quoted Guenther as saying that U.S. Geological Survey work already satisfies the Verde Partnership legislation’s requirement for a Verde Valley water budget.

“It’s not my style to make a call” like that, Guenther said. “We still need to do some nested (computer) models to perfect that” budget.

Holmes’ PowerPoint presentation also repeatedly calculates Verde Partnership oversight committee membership based on Yavapai County population statistics, not basin statistics. Yavapai represents only half of the basin’s land base.

Holmes and the Prescott area’s latest structure proposal misquote the San Pedro’s structure requirements, too.

The Prescott-area municipalities want to become partnership members and are negotiating in good faith, Prescott Mayor Rowle Simmons said, although he admits that it might not appear that way.

“I’d like to see the partnership exist,” Fann said. “I’d like to see us all on board, and I’m saying that from the bottom of my heart.”

Roecker thinks the Prescott-area governments eventually will join, but the process needs to start all over again.

Guenther still believes everyone could get together.

“Right now, they’re all just lobbing grenades over each other’s walls,” Guenther said. “They could save a lot of energy if they just drop their territorial barriers and quit trying to play king of the mountain.”