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Willcox's water woes are cautionary tale for Ariz.

For a time, free-wheeling, unregulated groundwater use worked well in southeastern Arizona. Big agricultural water users felt free to expand. Towns like Willcox grew. Government and its regulators kept their noses out of it.

As long as the rains fell, it all seemed to work pretty well.

Then, around 1998, the rains stopped, and the laissez faire approach no longer worked so well.

If ever there was an argument on behalf of a regulated water market in Arizona, it is in southeastern Arizona, where drought has dried up wells and fueled inevitable conflicts among nearly everyone over access to the scarce groundwater that remains.

The state's landmark Groundwater Management Act of 1980 worked remarkably well for a time. It is the main reason Arizona largely is not in water crisis like California.

But the act's loopholes — including allowing rural regions, like Willcox, to opt out — are taking a toll.

The water crisis in Willcox is not just a morality tale of what a small, rural community should have done. It is a harbinger of what may still happen across Arizona if we fail to shore up and modernize the 35-year-old act.

As *The Republic's* Caitlin McGlade reported earlier this week, farmers, ranchers and urbanites in the Willcox area are battling for access to that one resource that none of them can do without.

But, their battle is even more fundamental than that. Fiercely independent and wary of a "we're here to help you" government, farmers in the area walled their region off from regulations of the groundwater act, which set controls on taking water from underground.

More heavily populated areas like Maricopa, Pima and Pinal counties came under the act's umbrella as "active management areas." Rural, isolated and (at the time) practically soggy with underground water reserves, Willcox and much of Cochise County were not.

That has changed. The 17-year drought is driving the price and availability of potable water out of the reach of many farmers and non-farmers alike. Worse, it is creating serious conflict between area residents who wish to let the fittest survive and those who, however reluctantly, see wisdom in setting limits on water use, particularly for water-consuming crops such as corn and alfalfa.

We understand and appreciate the independent streak of the people of Willcox. It is not unusual in Arizona to be suspicious of government. But with water tables falling in unregulated areas throughout the state, wells coughing up gravel and aquifers collapsing, the economic survival of much of rural Arizona, not just Willcox, is in jeopardy.

Even in active-management areas, the paucity of water — see: a half-empty Lake Mead — demands reform of the 1980 act. Local pumping of groundwater is depleting some isolated aquifers. It is well past time to act in everyone's best interest.

Water shortages are rarely fixed in the middle of a crisis.

But one long-term resolution for Willcox should be evident. It is the same answer available to all regions facing similar risks: Coming under the umbrella of the Groundwater Management Act.

In a sense, the water crisis facing Cochise County is a function of basic free-market principles of supply and demand. With no restrictions on drilling water, the area set itself up for a growth spurt. As McGlade reported, more than 300 new farms began operations (including drilling new wells) in Cochise County since then. The "don't tread on me" spirit reigned.

Now, the availability of water is forcing the need for new answers. The viability of Arizona's farming and ranching legacy outside the boundaries of the Groundwater Management Act depends on what those answers are.



Dennis Killmer works on drilling a well in April near Willcox. The state's long drought highlights the need for all of Arizona to opt into controls on taking water from underground.

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