

Water users aim for new conservation option

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WILLCOX -- Since the Groundwater Management Act of 1980, the State of Arizona has not had a third option on the books.

However, a group of Willcox Basin farmers, vintners and homeowners are working to change that.

Currently, there are two available water management tools designed to directly manage groundwater withdrawal and use – Active Management Areas (AMA) and Irrigation Non-Expansion Areas (INA).

Groundwater withdrawn from inside an AMA may be subject to withdrawal fees, metering, annual reporting, conservation requirements, and other provisions; while that withdrawn from inside an INA may be subject to metering and reporting, said Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) Public Information Officer Michelle Moreno.

She explained that while the local community could initiate the process to establish a new AMA or INA, “at this time ADWR does not believe these tools would be the best solution for the Willcox Basin.”

Enter the proposed “Willcox Basin Groundwater Conservation Area (WBGCA).”

In October 2014, then-ADWR Director Michael Lacey and his staff began meeting in Willcox with a group of farmers, vintners, and Pearce-Sunsites area homeowners “to discuss water management strategies for this area.”

Brent Haas, along with County Supervisor Richard Searle and a few other local growers and ranchers, met with the Range News last week to discuss this group’s “work in progress.”

“The ADWR got on board right away,” said Haas, who farms north of Willcox.

He told the Range News that ADWR “wrote our proposal after listening to all concerns and ideas from the group as a whole.”

“The WBGCA committee is happy to be at the table trying to come up with a local solution to our overdraft issue, at the same time keeping Agriculture in the community a viable industry,” said Alan Seitz, who owns “old farm ground” in the Sunsites area, but had farmed in the Richland area until last year.

“The committee, as a whole, agrees that something needs to be done – just not the options that are already out there,” he told the Range News.

“They won’t work for the Willcox Basin,” said Rod Keeling, with Keeling Schaefer Vineyards, in Pearce.

“There has never been a petitioned INA or AMA since 1980. We thought there should be a better way of doing it.”

“We farm about 25 percent of the acreage that was farmed in 1974,” said Keeling, adding, “The Ag industry foot print is much smaller than it was.”

“What we are proposing is a third management area,” he told the Range News. “We would not be changing the AMA or the INA.”

Key components of the proposed groundwater conservation area include:

- Minimal regulations
- A management structure to emphasize conservation and reduce the impact on local well users
- The area may be a basin or a sub-basin, more than one adjacent basin or sub-basin, but cannot be smaller than a sub-basin.
- Irrigation

The proposed WBGCA would freeze existing large irrigation uses, but allow for converting “established larger irrigation rights to new uses with increased efficiency.”

This allows for “the portability of irrigation with increased efficiency,” as well as for “limited creation of new small irrigation rights” for low water use crops.

- Creation of two new irrigation rights

One is grandfathered high water-use irrigation acres (HWI), which are traditional irrigation acres.

The other is new low water-use irrigation acres (LWI), which are newly created irrigation acres only for low water-use crops using high efficiency irrigation methods (1.5 acre feet per acre or less).

- Metering and reporting of groundwater use, to include all non-exempt wells (irrigation, municipal and industrial); exempt wells irrigating under LWI rights; and new exempt domestic and stock wells (may estimate, but a meter is not required).
- Irrigation of less than two acres would be exempt, but limited to 10 acre-feet per year.
- A well impact review for new wells would be required for all non-exempt wells, as well as exempt wells irrigating LWI lands of two acres or more, with a pumping volume of greater than 10 acre-feet per year.
- The creation of a Groundwater Users Advisory Council (GUAC) to advise the ADWR Director on general management practices in the WBGCA and recommend conservation, mitigation, and augmentation projects supported by withdrawal fees.
- The ADWR Director may appoint an area director.
- Mandatory water adequacy, that all new subdivisions must obtain a water adequacy determination.

- Agricultural, municipal and industrial users would adopt best management practices (BMP) to support conservation.

About 100 people attended the Feb. 27 meeting the group held at Valley TeleCom to present its proposal to the Agricultural community, Haas told the Range News.

“The room was full,” Keeling said.

Haas said that the group’s representatives from the Pearce-Sunsites area were invited to the Feb. 27 Ag meeting, but declined in order to give the Ag community a chance to speak freely.

Members of the group did attend the Feb. 24 meeting in Sunsites to present the proposed WBGCA.

“Everybody saw some value in it,” said Mark Cook, with Coronado Vineyards in Willcox.

“I think everyone agrees that it’s a good start, anyway.”

Keeling said that his general impression at both the Sunsites and Ag meetings is that progress has been made, and that there is growing consensus among water users.

“I heard very reasonable people at the Sunsites homeowners meeting as they were presented with the issues and concerns of the Ag Community,” Haas told the Range News.

“This is such an important issue. The homeowners brought everyone to the table, and I want to thank them for that.”

Both Searle and Riggs talked about the Cochise-Graham Cattle Growers Association, who gave the WBGCA its approval during last month’s regularly scheduled meeting.

“It wasn’t unanimous,” said Searle, adding that there was nonetheless strong support for it.

Riggs said, “As cattle growers, we just got into this a couple of weeks ago. We are working on specific details of what needs to be added to the WBGCA.”

Ultimately, the WBGCA would go before the Arizona State Legislature.

Haas said that Reps. David Stevens and Sen. Gail Griffin are aware of the proposal, as well as Rep. Brenda Barton, who is chairman of the legislature’s Agriculture and Water Committee.

“We are an ad hoc committee,” said Haas.

“We will still have to go through normal, legislative channels. People will have the opportunity to lobby and converse about it.”

Keeling said that the group’s goal is to have the WBGCA “written in the fall and introduced in the 2016 legislative session.”

“We are thinking about the next 50 years, not just the next couple of years,” he told the Range News.

“Another 18 months of no regulation will get us to something much better than we have today.”

