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Blue Ridge Reservoir makes Payson one of the few rural areas in the state with enough water. Photo by Pete Aleshire. | Buy a print of this

By **Pete Aleshire**

As of Tuesday, July 23, 2013

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Photo by Andy Towle
Rep. Brenda Barton (R-Payson)

Jump for joy Rim Country residents! We have water!

Unlike most rural areas of the state like Prescott or Sierra Vista, Payson has plenty of water to handle its future growth.

That fact was abundantly clear at a recent state legislative subcommittee meeting hosted by Representative Brenda Barton (R-Payson).

Representatives Lisa Otondo, Darin Mitchell, Frank Pratt, and Herb Guenther joined Barton in Payson to discuss the controversial Senate Bill 2338, which died in the Legislature last year. The bill would have set up regional water authorities to monitor, regulate and develop water supplies in thirsty regions

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Photo by Andy Towle

On behalf of farmers Robbie Woodhouse, left, opposed a bill proposed by Rep. Brenda Barton (R-Payson) at a hearing in Payson.

throughout the state. The bill died in a flurry of criticism from farmers, Valley water users and hard-pressed rural areas. Advocates said the state needs a comprehensive, statewide water policy to prevent economic powerhouses like Phoenix from draining

the water supply of rural areas — like Los Angeles did to when it turned the Owens Valley from a rich farming area to a high desert.

Barton let the bill die in the water resources committee she chaired, but promised to hold a series of hearings throughout the state to try to develop a consensus plan to deal with a projected shortfall of millions of acre-feet of water : decades.

The group has spent the summer visiting Arizona's rural districts from Yuma to Flagstaff, talking to citizens on the possibility of creating regional augmentation authorities.

They have received an earful.

Representatives of cattle

grower associations and agricultural interests came out of the woodwork to pan the grounds that the appointed regional water authority boards would have too much water supply.

"I hope when you are done, you kill the bill and let it rest in peace," said Robby Woodhouse, a generation farmer from the Mohave Valley. "This is coming from people like myself who produce — with no farms and ranches, there is no food."

Currently, farmers and ranchers use about 4.4 million acre-feet annually — about 10 percent of total water use, according to a report by the Arizona Department of Water Resources. The state uses about 7 million acre-feet annually. Payson uses about 1,800 acre-feet per year. One acre-foot equals about 325,851 gallons — enough for the average family of four for one year.

Municipal users consume about 1.5 million acre-feet annually and industry uses 500,000 acre-feet.

The rural areas of Arizona worry regional water authorities, with no accountability to voters, won't protect their water from Phoenix and Tucson.

History has proved them right. Barton has used the story of the demise of the Owens Valley in California as a cautionary example. At the turn of the century, at the same time Congress signed over to the Salt River Project (SRP) rights to all surface water from the Salt, Verde and Gila rivers, Los Angeles water providers quietly bought up all the land for the water rights.

At the time, Owens Valley was a verdant farming community surrounding a lake. L.A. water providers piped all the water to the burgeoning city, turning the Owens Valley into a windswept desert.

The hearing underscored the deep-seated rivalries between water users in the state, in the face of declining flows in the Colorado River and projections that suggest the state will need to find another 4 million acre-feet or more.

That makes Payson something of a model for rural Arizona. Town leaders worked for decades to secure rights to water from the Blue Ridge Reservoir, in collaboration with the Salt River Project. The Valley utility company now has rights to about 11,000 acre-feet in that reservoir, while Payson and other Northern Gila County communities have rights to 3,500 acre-feet.

Water from the reservoir will more than double Payson's sustainable water supply. But it took decades of effort to line up the water rights and the financing.

Barton hoped her bill would have allowed other rural communities the chance to keep their water, too. But critics swarmed the bill, worried about eminent domain, the definition of augmentation, power over existing water entities, and a lack of accountability.

"I hope the people in all of those areas that brought forward concerns are not ignored," said AnnaMarie Norre, a representative from the Western Growers Association. "(SB 2338) does the exact opposite of bringing Arizona together. We need to work on long-term and global plans. In my mind, if the entire state of Arizona has to be involved, it should be with the Arizona Water Department."

Representative Guenther used to head up the Arizona Water Department.

"I would just like to clarify the water belongs to Arizona and the people of Arizona," he said.

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Mayor Kenny Evans suggested the answer to the problem of rural areas being dealt out of the water game, was to give them the tools to sit at the table.

"We have to find additional revenue to find ways to get water from one place to another, that leads to how do we more equitably share water," he said. "To do nothing is not an option."

Evans said it was not easy for Payson to grab its piece of the Blue Ridge water. The town had to find millions of dollars through grants and other funding sources. He said not every rural community has the wherewithal to put together that much money. He suggested the Legislature find a way to help other communities find the tools to obtain their own water.

Evans said he has seen the percentage of water available for rural areas drop by 20 percent. His observation is backed up by a study done by the U.S. Geological Survey that concluded the flow of the Verde River would drop by thousands of acre-feet for the next century due to over-pumping.

Already Prescott and the Verde Valley are locked in battle with the Salt River Project over the Verde River.

Andy Grosetta from the Arizona Cattle Grower's Association said the state and federal governments should focus on harvesting trees to increase the water yield. A dramatic increase in tree densities in the ponderosa pine forests has sharply reduced runoff, drying up once year-round creeks along the face of the Mogollon Rim.

Grosetta said the state should focus on developing additional water sources, rather than moving water from one place to another.

"Just the issue in the ... Verde Valley — 10,800 acre-feet of water is taken up by trees. Trees use 22,000 acre-feet per year on the high end — that's more than each town pumps," he said. "We talk about augmentation and more water, let's talk about removal of trees. Let's remove cottonwood and willow trees. Take a look at these methods that create new wet water."

Water diversions and groundwater pumping have already degraded or destroyed some 90 percent of the once-abundant cottonwood-willow habitat in Arizona.

Guenther suggested the answer to Arizona's water problem was desalinization — turning ocean water into drinking water.

"Desalinization is a viable scientific use," he said. "It can be done responsibly and efficiently. Californians, they think it's their ocean, so we have a problem there. So we're trying to work with Mexico. Mexico can be easier to work with than California. We need to assert rights to the ocean even if we take it by force," he joked.

The audience tittered, but with California taking millions of gallons from the Colorado River, Guenther was serious. Arizona gets 2.8 million acre-feet annually from the Colorado River. However, decades ago the seven states along the Colorado River divided up its flow at the end of a long, wet period. As a result, they promised far more water than the river carries. Studies suggest the shortfall amounts to about 3 million acre-feet annually — with Arizona in line behind California.

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