



Public Policy Review

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AZ Water Planning, A Glass Both Half Filled and Half Empty



During the course of a year, I give over 30 invited lectures and talks to groups ranging from water professionals from foreign countries to local community groups. My usual assignment is to provide an overview of Arizona water management. In my typical 30- to 50-minute presentations I attempt to educate the audience

about Arizona's water management framework. I discuss our water management achievements and innovations — as well as our challenges. At the end of most presentations, I include what I call my “Issues and Challenges” slide. In our ever dynamic and changing environment, I believe it is important to note the significant uncertainties and issues facing water managers.

To better convey a message that is neither overly pessimistic nor optimistic, I've recently added a graphic of a water glass that might either be half full or half empty to my concluding slide. Contributing to the impression that the glass is half filled is my firm belief that there are many positive aspects to our water management framework in Arizona, particularly our groundwater management in the Active Management Areas. Notable achievements half filling the glass include our assured and adequate water supply program, our water storage and recovery program, and our reliance on local groups to consider drought impacts as well as watershed based water supply and water quality.

Some of our state's best accomplishments are not known to those outside the water world. For example, we are storing vast amounts of water through the Arizona Water Banking Authority, a state agency with a very low profile. I note that water managers are spending a significant amount of their time, often in collaboration with others in the state and the broader region, contemplating solutions. Those outside the water world would be truly surprised by the amount of time water managers spend planning for the future.

As I wrote in a recent column, however, I am concerned about our lack of regional and statewide water planning, a deficiency that reflects both lack of a mandate and the limited resources to support coordinated water planning efforts. Admittedly, the Central Arizona Project has an active group looking at adding water supplies to our portfolio, but its focus is on Central Arizona. And the folks in the Upper San Pedro are working hard to develop the framework to present to the voters for their water district.

But when I hear of water users from different parts of the state talk hopefully about Colorado River water as part of their future water supplies, I wonder if the groups know of each other. Not only is the state's Colorado River water allotment almost fully allocated, but the infrastructure required to deliver water

that might be secured could be very costly. And predictions that the Southwest will become drier and warmer have raised questions, particularly about Colorado River flow assumptions. I think it would be wise to take a statewide look to seek possibilities for economies associated with infrastructure investment, as well as possible conflicts in plans.

Looked at another way, and the glass is half empty. Contributing to the half-empty impression is my list of items in need of continuing and ongoing efforts. These make up my current “Issues and Challenges” list and include, in no particular order: drought; climate change; growth and the need for additional supplies; water management outside the AMAs, including water quantity assessments; water quality; use of effluent for potable and other water needs (the next major “new” water source); access to and utilization of renewable supplies; interstate and international water issues; recognition of the surface water/groundwater interface; riparian areas and other environmental considerations related to water; expansion of conservation programs; recovery of stored water; approaches to replenishment by the Central Arizona Groundwater Replenishment District; water costs/pricing; and water planning. Undoubtedly the list could go on.

One might be tempted to give way to despondency and despair. Yet that would be premature because capable water professionals and officials recognize these troublesome issues and they are being addressed within our current water management framework. (Remember as you reach for the glass it is half filled.) The critical question is whether we are doing enough. I think we can do more as a state, particularly when it comes to planning for our future and involving those beyond the water community.

With growth temporarily slowed, now is the ideal time to assess where we are and what we need to be doing to prepare for the future, even in the face of many uncertainties and challenges. We need to look at the AMAs, where development of the Fourth Management Plans is unlikely to include a regional water management component, along with the rest of the state. In the early part of this decade, a Governor's Commission focused on the AMAs only. Later, the Statewide Water Advisory Group has focused on the other parts of Arizona. All areas require attention. We need legislative support to assemble resources to enable us to work together on a statewide water plan.

This will require participation from all areas of Arizona and all the water using sectors. Significant resources must be devoted to communicating with the general public. In other states, such as Oklahoma and Minnesota, centers like the WRRC have helped with this effort. WRRC would like to participate. I'm ready. Are you? ■■■