

Arizona lawmakers grapple with rural water concerns

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By Paul Davenport, staff writer

PHOENIX -- A quarter of a century after Arizona lawmakers passed a historic law to regulate groundwater use in urban areas, those legislators' successors are preparing to take on the contentious issue again.

Lawmakers this time are focusing on areas long regarded as rural but now increasingly strained by population growth, either right in their own back yards or because nearby urban areas are competing for scarce water amid stubborn drought conditions.

"We're finally saying that something has to be done," said Patrick Call, a Cochise County supervisor who worked on a statewide water task force that called for action. "We didn't have this sort of growth 10 years ago."

Bills advancing in the Legislature this session include measures to permit local governments to place new restrictions on development in areas that lack adequate water supplies and to help areas short on water find ways to pay for augmenting supplies.

But like most things associated with water in this mostly desert state, it's not been smooth sailing for those bills and others.

While supporters say the various proposals are long overdue, critics say some of the measures could tread on the rights of voters and property owners.

The 1980 groundwater law that imposed new pumping restrictions on Phoenix, Tucson and certain other parts of the state was a hard-fought compromise between cities, farmers and other interests, and a key legislator in the current effort said there are similar dynamics at play today.

"Arizona is notoriously independent, and especially rural Arizona is notoriously independent, but at this point we have recognized with growth and private property rights that we hold dear that we need to regulate and protect our natural resources," said Rep. Lucy Mason, R-Prescott.

Arizona is the nation's fastest growing state. While approximately four of every five current and future residents will live in the Phoenix and Tucson metro areas,

smaller cities and towns also are facing strains from that population growth.

In parts of eastern and northern Arizona, residents have to truck in water. Elsewhere, there are fears that groundwater pumping could dry up streams and rivers.

"Growth is causing a need for some better management tools in rural areas," said Sen. Marsha Arzberger, a Willcox Democrat who is sponsoring a bill that is the cornerstone of the legislative effort.

Arzberger's bill would let rural counties and municipalities hinge their approval of new subdivisions on whether they have assured water supplies.

The bill has been awaiting a final House vote since mid-March, when it was put on ice while lawmakers focused on other bills.

Though at least for now it wouldn't appropriate any state dollars, the primary companion bill would create a state fund to help communities pay for projects to augment water supplies.

"The last thing I want to see is the regulation (bill) go through without the fund," said Mason, chairman of the House Water and Agriculture Committee.

Also in the mix: newly unveiled and hotly debated House and Senate versions of a contentious proposal to create a new water district in the watershed of the San Pedro River, one of Arizona's few free-flowing rivers and site of a sensitive riparian area.

Supporters say action is needed to ensure that Fort Huachuca, a major Army base in Sierra Vista, doesn't close because of concerns for enough water for the habitat.

"We have to do something and we have to do something now," said Herb Guenther, director of the state Department of Water Resources.

The San Pedro measures are controversial, in large part because of questions over whether the state should require that voters approve the district's creation and whether its future actions to round up new water supplies would put new costs on taxpayers to import water.

Mary Ann Black, a Sierra Vista real estate agent and member of a conservation

district board, said state legislation isn't necessary because there are alternatives available to protect the aquifer.

"We know what we can do with recharge and storm water harvesting," Black said.

Meanwhile, Yavapai County Supervisor Carol Springer is urging other local officials to oppose Arzberger's subdivision bill.

Once a county or municipality declares that subdivisions need an assured water supply, they can't reverse that decision down the road, she noted. "So much for local control over local ordinances."

Arzberger said it wouldn't be fair to a subdivision developer who bears the cost of finding an assured water supply if subsequent projects next door don't have the burden.

It was because of the gravity of such declarations that the bill requires that a county's decision be by a unanimous vote of its supervisors, Arzberger said.

The Sierra Club criticizes the funding bill as merely a mechanism for fueling sprawl and the San Pedro measures as short on specifics to protect the river's flows.

"If you do a word search, it never says 'San Pedro River,'" said Sandy Bahr, a lobbyist for the environmental group.

Meanwhile, the Arizona Association of Realtors says lawmakers should be careful about what wording they include. Otherwise, they could give environmentalists a toehold to sue, said association lobbyist Tom Farley.

Rita Maguire, a former state water resources director under two Republican governors, acknowledged that local officials will hear opposition from developers and others concerning the costs of water restrictions and supply projects.

But current residents of those areas need to weigh in because water shortages won't affect only newcomers, Maguire said. "People tend to forget that," she said. "It protects their existing water supply." #

http://www.nctimes.com/articles/2007/04/03/news/state/16_01_194_2_07.txt

SHUTDOWN FOR SUPPLIES:

Pipeline shutdown set; 1 million residents asked to conserve water while repairs are made
San Bernardino Sun – 4/3/07
By Will Bigham, staff writer

One million customers in the Inland Empire will be asked to cut back on their water use after officials discovered severe damage in a section of a major water pipeline.

The shutdown of the Rialto Feeder pipeline, which provides imported Northern California water to nine Inland Empire cities, will last nine days, from April 16 to 24.

During the repairs, water officials are urging residents to suspend outdoor watering and cut back on indoor water use.

The pipeline shutdown will affect customers in Chino, Chino Hills, Claremont, Fontana, La Verne, Montclair, Ontario, Rancho Cucamonga and Upland.

The pipeline is managed by the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the region's major water importer.

Two months ago the pipeline was shut down for repairs, and residents were asked to conserve water for one week.

During the repair process, water officials conducted a routine inspection of the line. MWD officials discovered last week there was severe damage to a section of the pipeline at the intersection of Amethyst Avenue and Orange Street in Rancho Cucamonga.

The damaged section of the 8-foot-diameter pipeline had breaks in 85 stress wires - about half of the total in the line - which, along with several other components, make up its support structure.

Water officials said the line showed no signs of damage when it was tested two years ago and that the sudden appearance of such severe damage was "highly unusual."

"We are very concerned about the condition of the pipe at this point," said Bob Muir, MWD spokesman. "We want to get in to repair it before we hit the summer months, when demand increases.

"We are perplexed that over the course of two years it can disintegrate to a point that it needs serious repairs. ... Earlier tests showed no damage at that site."

Officials suspect the damage was caused by utility workers striking the pipe during a recent dig.

Without water conservation, local service could be severely impacted, officials said. Local water supplies consist in large part of imported water, though the percentage used varies depending on the district.

Water supplies to cities within the jurisdiction of the Inland Empire Utilities Agency, which covers all the affected San Bernardino County cities, consist of an average of 30 percent imported water.

Usually shutdowns are planned far in advance, and water companies have six to eight months to notify residents of the shutdown and urge water conservation.

But with only three weeks' lead time, officials are now scrambling to get the word out, with some local agencies sending workers out to walk door to door.

Residents are urged during the nine-day period to stop watering of landscapes and lawns, hand washing cars, filling swimming pools and spas, and hosing down driveways and sidewalks.

"If you're planning to plant spring plants, hold off on that until after the shutdown," Muir said.

Steps to reduce indoor water consumption, officials said, include running only full loads in washers and dishwashers, not leaving water running while washing dishes, brushing teeth and shaving, and keeping showers to a maximum of 10 minutes. #