

It's Not Just the San Pedro: Legal Overpumping in the Eastern Part of Cochise County is Sucking that Aquifer Dry Too [August 29, 2019]

While much of our attention in Cochise County must be focused on the unsustainable growth and consequent overpumping of groundwater that is sucking the San Pedro River dry, we also need to pay attention to the unconscionable and largely unregulated agricultural overpumping in the eastern half of the county that lies between Willcox and Douglas.

Bounded on the west by the Dragoon and Mule Mountains and on the east by the Chiricahuas and Peloncillos, the area includes the fertile Sulphur Springs Valley, home of the Sunizona, Kansas Settlement and Elfrida agricultural communities.

In recent years, the water situation there has been made radically worse due to hundreds of acres being newly planted to orchards (especially pecans), vineyards, ethanol corn, and to one enormous factory farm dairying operation.

In July 2018 a detailed story in the New York Times Magazine focused on a family in the Elfrida area whose well had gone dry, but placed their sad situation in the broader contexts of the Sulphur Springs Valley as a whole and the related groundwater crisis throughout the western US:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/19/magazine/the-water-wars-of-arizona.html>

Most media and governmental attention has been drawn to the Willcox area, where overpumping has resulted in several cones of depression in the groundwater, all too reminiscent of the cone under the Sierra Vista-Fort Huachuca area of the upper San Pedro Basin that is well on the way to becoming the cone that swallowed the San Pedro River.

Of particular concern is the cone under the Kansas Settlement area, home of the Coronado Farms dairy, an operation that includes tens of thousands of cattle and thousands of acres of croplands for feeding them.

While the powers that be in the San Pedro basin (best known in their current avatar as the Upper San Pedro Partnership) can, after 30 years of effort, claim some modicum of success in that the rate of overpumping there has declined somewhat -- not ended, mind you: they're still taking out way more water than goes back in, but the rate of overpumping is a little less; in the Sulphur Springs Valley there hasn't been even a pretense toward stopping the overdraft, which was last addressed effectively by implementation of Gov. Babbitt's 1980 Groundwater Act.

But thanks in large part to opposition by big-ag and its representatives in state and local government, much of the Sulphur Springs Valley was left exempt from the Active Management Area (AMA) and Irrigation Non-expansion Area (INA) protections of the Act.

One of the most recent examples of the utter ineffectuality of State and County authorities to deal with this matter was reported by Shar Porier in the Sierra Vista Herald last November:

https://www.myheraldreview.com/news/business/wells-in-eastern-part-of-county-won-t-get-funding/article_acfc612a-e3ed-11e8-9b41-ff92e767c3f0.html

(If you can't read this html file, see PDF File below)

Even the most modest of requests for voluntary help from the industry itself, requests for donations to help property owners cover the cost of lowering their wells due to the big-ag overpumping, have been blown off by the companies responsible. So much for the good neighbor myth.

It seems obvious to many residents that the big-ag companies, which they say are often not local family-owned operations but out-of-state corporations, don't give a hoot about the residents or the environment and will, when the aquifer dries up, just move on to somewhere else where the water is cheap and the regulations weak or non-existent as they are here.

The State has been well aware of the problems for years. It started receiving reports of wells going dry as early as 2014, and has known of serious land subsidence in the area for much longer.

The most recent series of studies and "well sweeps" by the Department of Water Resources (DWR) in the eastern part of the county began about five years ago, as reported by Porier last December:

https://www.myheraldreview.com/news/cochise_county/study-continued-groundwater-decline-in-willcox-basin/article_e5375b28-f5d4-11e8-992a-6f673c543413.html

The DWR report cited in the Herald article clearly documents the dwindling groundwater supply and steady lowering of the water table throughout the Sulphur Springs Valley in the past few years, especially in the Willcox-Sunizona-Kansas Settlement area of high unchecked agricultural growth:

www.azwater.gov/azdwr/PublicInformationOfficer/SEArizonaInformation.htm

The problem has been discussed and debated in the State Legislature, the Governor's office, at DWR, and among Cochise County Supervisors and agencies for more than a decade. The result? -- more orchards, more overpumping, and more families forced to move or spend thousands of dollars to deepen their wells. And more dairy farms.

In estimating capacity of available water in the Willcox basin, DWR figured the bottom of the aquifer at 1200 feet. It's been suggested that below that level the water may be too contaminated or too expensive to pump.

<http://www.azwater.gov/AzDWR/StatewidePlanning/WaterAtlas/SEArizona/Groundwater/Willcox.htm>

That rock bottom figure may account in part for why the well at the new dairy about to go into

operation in the Turkey Creek drainage is reportedly 1100 feet deep. Evidently, Riverview, the Minnesota-based corporation that owns Coronado Farms, wants to be able to pump until the water table reaches that level -- which, at the rate of 1000 gal/minute or more, shouldn't take that long.