

Douglas AMA Voters Didn't Ask for Water Regulation to Die a Slightly Slower Death- Arizona Republic (5 April 2023)

Douglas AMA voters didn't ask for water regulation to die a slightly slower death

Opinion: The newly created Douglas Active Management Area needs creative water regulation to sustain our community and the farmers who live here.

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Voters agreed this fall to make the Douglas groundwater basin in southeastern Arizona an active management area.

In 2022 the residents of the Douglas Water Basin community voted to designate our basin as an Active Management Area, the first citizen-initiated AMA in Arizona.

The reason for this initiative was simple: Declining water levels are causing earth fissures, dry wells and the loss of local farmers, who feel they have no option but to sell to industrial operations.

While AMA legislation has some hard and fast rules about what can and cannot be done in such a designated area, the law allows for a lot of flexibility in the setting of “management goals” and “management plans,” as there is no one-size-fits-all management plan for all groundwater basins. AMAs without 'safe yield' have struggled

The most common management goal of other AMAs in Arizona is “safe yield,” which means keeping a balanced water budget – you don't take out more than gets put in.

But as the Santa Cruz AMA discovered, this goal can be interpreted in ways that do not stop groundwater decline. They have since updated their goal to include “long-term stabilization of local water tables” – a necessary amendment for a community at risk of losing access to groundwater.

The Pinal AMA, meanwhile, decided to forgo “safe yield” and adopt a “planned depletion” policy, which does not work toward a balanced water budget. Instead, they are anticipating continued water decline and plan to replace agricultural operations with urban expansion.

However, the consequence of “planned depletion” is that Pinal is expected to have a water shortage of 8 million acre-feet (2.6 trillion gallons) over the next 100 years, which has stunted their economic development.

Without a strong direction toward sustainable groundwater use, prevailing economic norms will continue to lead Arizona's basin communities to the dead ends that other groundwater-dependent communities throughout the country and world now face.

'Planned depletion' is not in our best interest

The residents of the Douglas Basin voted for an AMA not because we would like to die a slightly slower death – we want to preserve our rural way of life for our future generations. If we achieve anything less than the stabilization of our water tables, we will have failed.

We need to start the difficult process of developing water management goals and policies that stabilize our water levels within a timeframe that protects residents and gives farmers enough time to adapt to less water use.

Another view: Lawmakers can't ignore rural groundwater issues

If the Douglas Basin adopts a “planned depletion” goal, we are missing our opportunity to start this process.

Arizona law states that our groundwater policies are in service of “protecting and stabilizing the general economy and welfare of this state and its citizens.”

It's not in the interest of our welfare that our valley be sucked dry and, as some would like to see happen, have our agriculture be replaced by thoughtless urban and suburban development. Protect local (not investor-owned) farming

We must make sure that our groundwater is managed in a way which keeps local agriculture sustainable.

This means stable water levels, limits on groundwater extraction for commercial and residential development and priorities of water rights for locals who live and farm here – not for absentee investors and their invasive operations.

Industrial agriculture operations owned by out-of-state investors and shareholders have been pouring into our valley.

These operations have been set up all over Arizona, taking advantage of our largely unregulated and unprotected groundwater supplies.

These entities are extracting our natural resources, converting them into profit and then moving that profit away from Arizona.

Our Douglas AMA policies must uphold the legal mandate (ARS §45-401) to protect our local economy and the welfare of our citizens.

Now is the time to innovate. Work with us

The citizens and policymakers of Arizona have an opportunity to innovate our land and water management policies.

There is nothing in the Legislature that prevents an Active Management Area from favoring locally owned agricultural operations.

There is, however, decades of evidence that our previous policies will not stabilize our groundwater levels.

We hope that the Arizona Department of Water Resources, Gov. Katie Hobbs, the governor's Water Policy Council and the governor's Office of Resiliency will be proactive in working with the residents of the Douglas Basin to design and implement policies that protect our well-being and sustain our rural and agricultural economies.

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