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Tucson's water future depends on stewardship, cooperation

By Robert Glennon

SPECIAL TO THE ARIZONA DAILY STAR

In describing Arizona, writers seldom use the words "progressive" or "innovative." But when it comes to water, it is entirely fitting.

The 1980 Groundwater Management Act provided a template for ending excessive pumping of our aquifers. The state's recharge and recovery program and incentives to reuse municipal effluent were equally at the cutting edge of sensible water management.

We in Tucson have special reason to be proud of how the community values water. Tucson Water's aggressive conservation program, exemplified by the Beat the Peak program, fostered respect and admiration for water-saving habits and desert landscaping.

Brad Lancaster, with his "Rainwater Harvesting for Drylands and Beyond" book series, has become the national guru on how to capture and use rainwater. Tucson became the first city in the country to mandate rainwater harvesting for new commercial construction.

Tucson Water has a well-deserved reputation as a well-run utility. And Pima County became the first county in the state to insist that water will be considered when developers seek to rezone land.

Before we become too smug, let's acknowledge that while per-person-per-day consumption has slightly declined, the number of residents has doubled. Population growth threatens to overwhelm our good intentions.

Our aquifers feel less stress thanks to the Central Arizona Project coming online, but there is no new oasis to tap into. Proposals to seed clouds or desalinate Sea of Cortez ocean water are ill-conceived dreams that hew to a time-worn philosophy that technological fixes will solve our water problem.

On some fronts, the state has backslid. The Central Arizona Groundwater Replenishment District weakened the Groundwater Management Act by opening a loophole for developers who would otherwise have difficulty proving an assured water supply for their subdivisions.

State law also, unfortunately, allows groundwater credits to be pumped from anyplace in the basin. This pernicious, hydrologically suspect rule threatens the precious few remaining riparian areas in Pima County. So does the exempt-well law that allows anyone to drill a well outside the service area of a water provider.

As I dream about the water future of my community, I imagine a future where our cities and towns and the county put aside their petty squabbles and unite to embrace an ambitious program to save riparian habitat.

If you go

Robert Glennon will be speaking and signing books at Antigone Books, 411 N. Fourth Ave., at 7 p.m. on Sept. 18.

We need local cooperation to deliver renewable water supplies to shallow groundwater areas, to restrict pumping from these areas, and to complete the purchase and set aside of sensitive lands in Arivaca, sections of Oro Valley, Green Valley, along Cienega Creek, Davidson Canyon, and along Sabino Creek and Tanque Verde Wash.

These rare riparian habitats are precious jewels in our desert environment and wise stewardship demands action to protect them.

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Disclosure: Robert Glennon is the water-policy adviser to Pima County.

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