

Willcox Basin Residents Response to Senator Kerr's and Farm Bureau's Resignation from Governor's Water Policy Council

As residents of the Willcox Basin, one of the most threatened groundwater basins in rural Arizona, we are deeply disappointed that Senator Sine Kerr and the Arizona Farm Bureau have decided to resign from the Governor's Water Policy Council. We are also disappointed that our own State Representative, Gail Griffin, continues to spread easily rebutted misinformation about past legislative proposals to protect groundwater in rural Arizona.

The Council's Rural Groundwater Committee is currently crafting a framework for a new legislative proposal to protect rural groundwater throughout the state. Such legislation is critical to ensuring long term water security in areas like ours where groundwater is the only significant source of water and yet that life-sustaining water is totally unprotected.

Groundwater is being pumped out of our basin at five times the rate of natural recharge, leading to declining water levels of as much as 10 feet per year in some locations. Over 97% of all groundwater withdrawals in our basin are for agriculture - and yet each day we see new land being cleared for more thirsty crops and orchards. Agricultural irrigation has grown by more than 80% over the past 25 years in our basin and one large corporate dairy and feedlot uses more water than the entire city of Tucson each year. Corporate farms and orchards from out of state attract investors who don't live in the area and who rely on our groundwater for profit, unlike local residents who use groundwater to sustain our lives and livelihoods.

Wells are going dry, the land is subsiding, and earth fissures are opening up damaging multiple roads and state highway 191. Deepening existing wells or drilling new wells comes at a steep price forcing some homeowners to haul water or leave the area entirely. Small-scale farmers are faced with the option of going into debt to drill a deeper well or sell out to the deep-pocketed corporate farms or orchards.

These are the very real consequences we live with every day while the state legislature does nothing to protect rural groundwater in Arizona.

Serious legislation to protect groundwater has been introduced in the state legislature in each of the past four years. None of these legislative proposals have ever been granted a hearing in the legislature thanks to Senator Kerr and Representative Griffin who chair the legislative committees which control water legislation. While the small family farm stands to lose the most here, the Farm Bureau did not support any of these legislative efforts. So it shouldn't surprise anyone that Senator Kerr and the Farm Bureau have opted to walk away from the work of the Governor's Water Policy Council.

All of the previous rural groundwater legislation was introduced by Republican legislators from rural Arizona and are not the radical proposals that Senator Kerr and Representative Griffin make them out to be. Senator Kerr and Representative Griffin would have you believe this legislation had no input from rural Arizonans and came from radical environmental groups intent on destroying agriculture in rural Arizona. Nothing could be further from the truth. These bills all had significant input and support from rural stakeholders including elected and municipal officials and rural residents of various political persuasions (including some of the authors of this letter).

We all depend on agriculture to provide the food and fiber that we rely on every day. At the same time agriculture is the biggest user of water resources across the entire state and even more so in many of Arizona's rural groundwater basins. Agriculture needs to be a big part of the solution, and we must be smart about what agriculture makes sense for a sustainable future for Arizona.

Rural Arizonans understand that we are past the point where maintaining the status quo is a viable option. Is the agricultural community ready to look beyond the status quo to come up with solutions that help everyone have enough water for the long term? In this regard, Senator Kerr's and the Farm Bureau's resignations from the Governor's Water Policy Council along with Representative Griffin's misinformation campaign speak volumes. They are actively obstructing good faith efforts to protect finite groundwater supplies. If groundwater protection bills fail in the next session of the legislature, we all know who to blame.

Respectfully submitted by Willcox Basin residents concerned about our water future.

Lisa Glenn
Lloyd Glenn
Ellen Jane Cohen
Kate Turner
William James McElroy
John Graffio
Kathy Carter
Stuart Carter
Neil Osterman
Tammy Osterman
Mark Spencer

Cheryl Knott
James Syme
Karen Sartain
Sallie Barthel
Pete Caras
Tracy Caras
Laurette LeVine
Mark LeVine
Steven Kisiel
Lucia Kisiel

More names to come...