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Ground-water removal threatens San Pedro, some say; state differs

By Enric Volante

The Arizona Daily Star

Some Arizonans remember when the Santa Cruz River flowed year-round past Tucson, nourishing the wildlife and people along its banks.

Today, it is a dry ditch that comes alive only with rain runoff or the city's excess waste water.

Environmental groups say the unchecked ground water pumping and surface water diversions that changed the Santa Cruz decades ago now threaten another Southern Arizona waterway — the wildlife-rich San Pedro River.

A recent state study, however, has concluded that through the year 2000, increased pumping of ground water in the growing Sierra Vista region will have little if any effect on the river.

State expects minimal effects

The long-awaited report by the Arizona Department of Water Resources is getting high marks from a group of local water users who say it shows the area's water situation is not grave.

But the environmental groups that initiated the study condemn the report.

"It has basically underestimated the ground water usage in a way that stacks the cards to not actively manage the ground water," said Lori Potter, an attorney with the Denver-based Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund.

Local chapters of the Sierra Club and Audubon Society prompted the study in 1984 by asking the state to impose ground water conservation measures in the Upper San Pedro Basin, an 1,800-square-mile area that stretches from the U.S.-Mexican border to north of Benson.

The area includes a 62-mile stretch of the San Pedro that scientists say nourishes the most diverse wildlife in North America — from rare gray hawks that nest there to the occasional ocelot and other exotic cats that wander north from Mexico.

Protection area sought

The draft report, which does not say whether the state should declare the "active-management area" sought by conservationists, characterizes the effects of the pumping as "small to moderate," with only the fast-growing Sierra Vista region experiencing significant drops in the water table.

Declaring an active management area would im-

pose stiff water-pumping controls outlined in the state Ground Water Management Act.

In the Sierra Vista area, where a 1973 Arizona Water Commission report held that the ground water level had dropped about 30 feet in 25 years, the report predicts it will fall up to 90 feet more between 1986 and the year 2000.

Water-table depression

A "cone of depression" in the area's water table probably covers 7.5 square miles, up from 5 square miles in 1968, although no land has yet subsided.

"By and large, I found the draft to be very balanced in its approach and realistic in its assumptions," said Judy Gignac, a Cochise County supervisor and president of the San Pedro Water Resources Association.

"It appears that the urgency in calling for hearings to designate an AMA (active-management area) is not really there," Gignac said.

"We don't want the San Pedro to become another Santa Cruz."

Gignac said the group supports a proposed conservation area along a 30-mile stretch of the San Pedro that has been acquired by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management. But she said most members want to find a way to manage water locally while accommodating municipal growth.

Growth predictions debated

Growth projections in the state study have drawn some of the heaviest fire from critics.

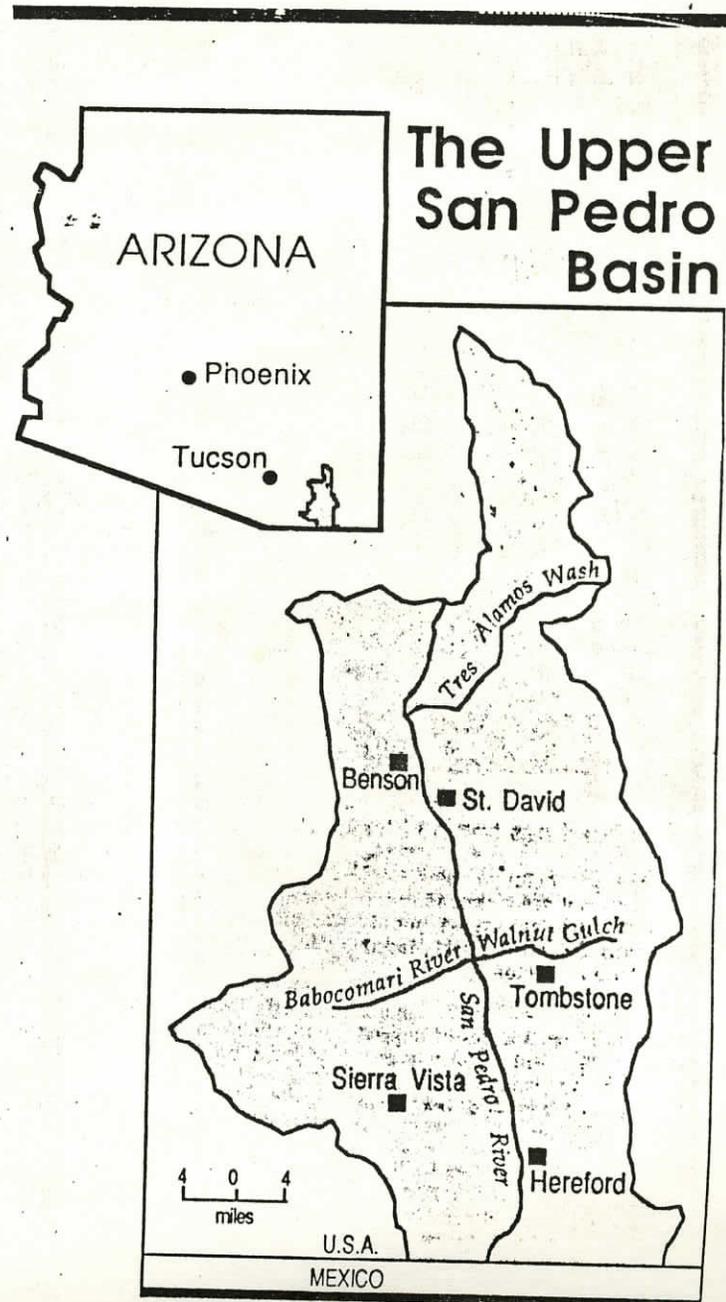
Michael Gregory, a Sierra Club representative, said the state predicts that Sierra Vista area residents will number about 50,000 at the end of the century, but the U.S. Census Bureau projects about 100,000.

The population discrepancy — plus the fact that the state study ignores pumping in the lower basin in Mexico — means the report's conclusions on future water supplies are way off, he said.

Gregory also faulted the state report for its failure to compare the amount of water being pumped with the amount replenished naturally each year.

In the early 1980s, state officials have said, farmers and cities took about 70,000 acre-feet a year, while nature returned only about 20,000 acre-feet. An acre-foot is roughly 326,000 gallons.

Farm pumping has dropped since then, but conservationists fear other pumping will replace and exceed it.



Judy Mergolis, The Arizona Daily Star