

Water Issues Op/Ed Piece

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Arizonans have cause for celebration, though most are probably unaware this year marks the 25th anniversary of wise water planning in our state as a result of the Groundwater Management Act passed by the legislature in 1980.

Part of what was so “groundbreaking” about the GMA is that it recognized a link between water supply and population growth. Western growth has historically been separated from water supply issues.

The GMA raised the question: is there enough water to sustain development for the next 100 years? It then imposed restrictions, primarily on five designated Active Management Areas identified as having the greatest use of groundwater.

The Assured Water Supply provisions of the GMA require that all new growth in these designated areas use renewable water supplies to meet their demands for 100 years. In fact, a development within an AMA can only be approved for sale to the public once it has demonstrated a sufficient water supply. This is a unique and important requirement for Arizona, and one that will help ensure responsible growth into the future.

The GMA created a clear priority for major urban growth to be fueled by renewable water supplies, not by groundwater. It also influenced cities to develop water conservation programs and expand wastewater recycling efforts.

These innovative measures reversed the trend of declining groundwater levels within several areas of our metro region. Insightful planning, significant investment and good management of our water resources have allowed the Valley to weather drought and staggering growth. Maricopa County’s population of 1.5 million in 1980 has more than doubled today. Yet since 1980, individual water use within our region has decreased and groundwater levels have risen.

The GMA further resulted in better water efficiency among commercial and industrial sectors. A primary example is the Chandler Reverse Osmosis treatment facility, funded by Intel and operated by the city to treat clean process water from Intel's Fab12. Highly treated process water from Fab12 is re-injected to the aquifer and banked by the city for future use. Approximately 2.5 billion gallons of drinking quality water has been recharged – enough to serve the needs of over 30,000 residents

Milestone anniversaries are a time for celebration, indeed. However, they also present a time for reflection. The GMA legislation enacted a quarter-century ago created the Department of Water Resources, which is under-funded and woefully short of resources, raising questions about whether the department can even fulfill its mission

Additional funding is critical for the agency to take the lead on conservation and drought management issues, help rural areas find new water supplies, and enforce regulations.

We can and should celebrate the 25th year of the GMA, but there are many more issues that need to be addressed – Colorado River water rights, rural planning, implementation of the Arizona Water Settlement Act and sustainability. Months of heavy rain have dampened our focus and resolve to tackle water concerns. However, we must continue Arizona's water legacy. Water stewardship isn't a choice — it's a responsibility.