



## Public Policy Review

by Sharon Megdal

### State Drought Plan on Right Road Despite Some Concerns



After about 18 months of work, the Governor's Drought Task Force sent its recommended Arizona Drought Preparedness Plan to Governor Napolitano. A key part of the Plan is the document, Operational Drought Plan. Also part of the Drought Preparedness Plan is a lengthy document, Background and Impact Assessment Section. A companion report is the Arizona Statewide

Water Conservation Strategy. The reports can be found at <http://water.az.gov/gdtf/>

A key question during the latter stages of the Task Force process was to what extent water conservation should be required as a drought response. The plan initially released for public comment included a Conservation Strategy Document and a requirement that locally developed Drought Contingency Plans include a water conservation component. The separate Conservation Strategy focused on developing a water conservation ethic over the long-term, beyond the immediate drought context. But there was no real guidance on what that conservation component of the drought plans should look like. The media and others questioned Arizona's consideration of a drought plan lacking mandatory conservation requirements as drought conditions worsen. The adopted plan included much more in the way of conservation requirements and guidance.

Included in the final document is a five-page table that ties the declared drought stage, which ranges from Normal to Extreme, with actions state government, communities and utilities, and individuals would take. Required and recommended conservation practices become more strict with the severity of the drought. Developed late in the process, the table was not subject to much public comment. It represents a good start, but refinement is needed. For example, under Extreme drought conditions, communities and utilities must prohibit "all public water uses not required for health or safety and publicize enforcement activities to customer[s]." Winter overseeding is to be prohibited, except for golf course greens. Individuals are to "use covers to reduce evaporation from pools."

As I read it, in Extreme drought conditions, water is not to be used for community or public pools but could be used for golf course greens and private pools. Does it make sense for the city pool to close while people can continue to keep their backyard pools full and golf course greens are kept green? A further look is required, and affected parties should have an opportunity to comment.

The Operational Drought Plan includes general recommendations to the Governor. The first recommendation is to seek resources to fund two half-time ADWR positions and funding for a university partner to work on "implementation, assessment and improvements to the Arizona Drought Preparedness Plan." It is

important to recognize that proper implementation of the plan will take resources, and this recommendation should be implemented as quickly as possible. ADWR has had its resources cut considerably over the past few years. To maintain momentum, finding the needed resources for ADWR should not have to wait until finalization of next year's budget.

The second recommendation is that ADWR should continue to facilitate coordinated water planning of counties, cities and water providers, with the task assigned to the agency's Rural Watershed Program and Local Area Impact Assessment Groups. (The Plan recommends the formation of the latter group.) This recommendation is recognition that additional work is needed in Arizona's rural communities to enable locally tailored drought plans to be developed.

The third recommendation is very significant. It requires every potable water system (public and private) to develop a Drought Contingency Plan to be submitted to ADWR by January 1, 2006. If implemented, this recommendation would result in hundreds of such plans being due in about a year. The recommendation states: "The Drought Plan must include both mitigation strategies, including a water conservation plan to reduce vulnerability to drought, and response actions." Since implementing this recommendation requires legislative action, the January 1, 2006 due date for the plans may be somewhat optimistic. Some small utilities may not have the staff needed to develop a plan. Also, there are likely unresolved questions regarding the ability or willingness of a private utility to enforce drought plan requirements. There will clearly be further discourse on this recommendation.

The fourth recommendation may be more significant than it appears. It recommends legislation to enable ADWR to require all water systems to provide to the agency consistent and coordinated water supply information. The information is expected to be "used at the state and local level to identify water uses within the system, determine conservation potential, and ensure reductions during times of critical need." Not only does the recommendation not specify exactly what is a water system that would be required to provide this information, the recommendation could be interpreted as suggesting that ADWR may determine water conservation potential rather than the local entities. A major effort would be required to carry out this task. It is not entirely clear to what extent this recommendation relates to drought planning, rather than water supply planning in general, although it is generally agreed that better data are needed outside the Active Management Areas. Further clarification may be needed before local communities not now required to report water use support this.

The fifth recommendation is to assess the merits of an Assured Water Supply program in non-AMAs. The need for economic analysis of the impacts of such a program along with public involvement is acknowledged. With the recent release of a white paper on this

subject by the Arizona Policy Forum, this recommendation has strong support in certain quarters and strong opposition in others. A thorough and perhaps heated debate is likely to ensue. But I hope people approach the debate with open minds. Requiring some demonstration of an adequate water supply does not have to be coupled with utilization of renewable water supplies, as in the AMAs in Central Arizona.

The final recommendation is that ADWR immediately initiate Local Area Impacts Assessment Groups. Their task will be “to identify a structure and contacts and to facilitate the implementation of the Arizona Drought Preparedness Plan.” The report suggests that the county emergency manager and a county Cooperative Extension agent co-chair these impact assessment groups and that they include representation from local, state and federal agencies

and other interested entities. This effort, too, will require much work but is essential if drought plans tailored to local conditions are to be adopted.

There is much, much more to the plan. It proposes to institutionalize the excellent work done by climate experts and resource managers on the Monitoring Technical Committee by making that group permanent. Again, it is important that momentum not be lost and that this important work continues.

It is a long plan that was a long time coming. Its recommendations are significant and are likely to be debated. What should not be debated, however, is that Arizona needs to approach drought response in a deliberate and thorough manner. The work of the Governor’s Drought Task Force provides a framework and process for reducing vulnerability to drought throughout the state. ■■