



June 21, 2017
COMMENTARY

Voodoo hydrology

By Michael Gregory
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Save

As Robin Silver's comments make clear (SVH June 18, "Center Calls San Pedro solution a 'lie'"), Supervisor Call's repeated allegations that the BLM's legal claim to the amount of water needed to maintain the San Pedro National Riparian Conservation Area (SPRNCA) is excessive and in fact constitutes a "water-grab" by the federal government against the good citizens of Cochise County, are exaggerated at best, demagogic at least, and are based in any case on a kind of voodoo hydrology.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell if Mr. Call thinks he is speaking for himself, or his constituents, or on behalf of the County, or of Developers United, but his agitation is appropriate, he says, because the recharge system of multimillion dollar projects he and his associates in the newly-formed Cochise Conservation Recharge Network (CCRN) are getting built will "save the river" without BLM's having to use all that water, leaving it, in effect, for use by development interests.

Supervisor Call cites studies that predict the cone of depression in the basin's aquifer caused by more than 50 years of over-pumping will at some unspecified but apparently not too distant time dry up the river. Even if we stop all pumping in the basin tomorrow, the river is doomed. But, he assures us, with the proposed recharge system, the river will be saved, a word that in this context takes on almost gospel overtones.

That the river is facing death is not in dispute. That's why we gave the riparian system federal protection in the first place. Over-pumping by Fort Huachuca and greater Sierra Vista (city and county) have taken and are taking more water out of the regional aquifer than nature replaces. Refusing all serious measures to stop the overpumping, they have created a deficit, a cone of depression in the groundwater that gets bigger all the time because they keep pumping out more than goes back in.

What Mr. Call means by "the river" is apparently nothing more than the diminishing in-stream flow in the riverbed. He does not mean the complex life-support system that extends a considerable distance from the riverbed both under and above ground. Not the whole riparian ecosystem the BLM is required to protect, but just the visible flow (or that plus the "base flow" of water more or less immediately under it). But of course the river is more than what meets the eye.

The recharge system Mr Call and his associates have started constructing does not address this larger, ecological interconnectedness of watershed and water except insofar as it is designed to take water from various parts of the watershed and deposit it on lands closer to the river. Robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Calling that “saving the river” stretches more than just a point. It is first cousin to the kind of fake news we hear so much of these days. “A lie,” Mr. Silver calls it. As the federal court said 15 years ago in deciding for the plaintiffs in *Center for Biological Diversity v Donald H. Rumsfeld*, a case involving a similar Fort Huachuca recharge project: “This . . . project is not intended to compensate for or mitigate the effects of groundwater pumping. The project . . . will delay and mask the effects of the deficit groundwater pumping.” Not save the river, but merely conceal the ongoing cause of its demise.

Keeping some semblance of a living river flowing undoubtedly is good in the short term for the biotic community immediate to the riverbed and for the appearance of things, and undoubtedly comforting to development interests who can continue to profit as long as robbing Peter is feasible, but by no means can it save the river without a concerted concomitant effort by Cochise County, Sierra Vista and the Department of Defense to end the over-pumping. But Mr. Call prefers voodoo hydrology to real solutions.

Michael Gregory was a member of the committee assembled by Governor Bruce Babbitt to draft enabling legislation that established the San Pedro Riparian national Conservation Area. He lives in McNeal.