



Rural Groundwater Conservation Concepts

Rural communities need new tools to secure their water future. Development of alternatives to the currently limited rural groundwater conservation options will be important to meet the specific and diverse needs of each rural community across Arizona. Representative Regina Cobb's 2021 bill, HB 2679, introduced the new concept of "Rural Management Areas" (RMAs). Below is a review of groundwater management options available to Arizonans today and an introduction to the concept of RMAs:

Active Management Areas (AMAs) (*existing*)

The 1980 Arizona Groundwater Act recognized the need to manage finite groundwater resources to support a growing population and economy. Areas with heavy reliance on groundwater were designated as AMAs. The AMAs were established to provide long-term management and conservation of their limited groundwater supplies.

There are currently five AMAs in Arizona. Within AMAs there are requirements and programs for groundwater use, including water rights and permits; an "assured water supply" program that applies to new subdivisions; well requirements and reporting; an underground storage and recovery program; a prohibition on expanded irrigation; and conservation requirements for industries, agriculture, and large municipal water providers. Management goals for each AMA are established by statute, and the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) develops and implements groundwater management plans to carry out conservation programs according to a prescriptive set of statutory guidelines.

Irrigation Non-Expansion Areas (INAs) (*existing*)

The 1980 Groundwater Management Act also established two initial Irrigation Non-Expansion Areas - the Joseph City INA and the Douglas INA. The Harquahala INA was subsequently created in 1981. An INA may be declared when ADWR finds there is not sufficient groundwater available for new or additional agricultural irrigation in that limited area. The test is whether there is no longer a reasonably safe supply for irrigation in that area at the current rates of pumping. After the INA is in place, no water users can expand agricultural irrigation inside the INA with an exception for small farm plots of less than 2 acres. The three current INAs are administered by ADWR AMA staff.

If a new INA is declared, current farms inside the INA may continue to irrigate if they were doing so in the previous 5 years, but they cannot add additional acreage.

Rural Management Areas (RMAs) (*proposed*)

Outside of the current AMAs and INAs, there are very few tools for management and conservation of groundwater. RMAs were proposed under HB 2679 introduced in 2021, which would permit county Boards of Supervisors to create an RMA for specific groundwater basins or sub-basins at risk. Counties could opt into this program and thus authorize creation of local plans to manage, protect, and conserve groundwater in regions outside existing AMAs.

Under the 2021 bill, an advisory council of local citizens would be appointed by the Governor, and that council would establish management goals and a groundwater conservation plan for these areas. Plans could contain tools and programs for management, protection, and conservation of groundwater and would be approved by ADWR before taking effect.



Why are RMAs needed in Arizona?

RMAs are an important, innovative step forward in creating a framework that allows communities to pursue locally driven water planning, promote water security, and make choices to ensure they have an economic future.

- We need this proposal to protect property owners and small family farms in rural Arizona. Right now, there is no protection for these property owners from a new large industrial farm or factory moving in nearby and using significant amounts of groundwater, causing current wells to run dry.
- Most of Arizona's metropolitan regions are covered by AMAs and more than 80% of our population already reside in AMAs where groundwater is managed and protected. This proposal extends protections to groundwater in the rural parts of the state.
- Arizona's brand has been one of successful groundwater management in urban areas since 1980, and now the absence of any groundwater management in rural Arizona poses a risk to our state's economic prosperity. Surely it is time for policies to be enacted that prevent the drying up of wells, and conserve our flowing streams and rivers.

Some Policy Considerations:

- **How will the state support RMAs?** The counties that opt into creation of an RMA will need expertise and support. For example, local councils could partner with ADWR in preparation of their local management plans.
- **How should the advisory councils be established?** The local council that guides the creation of local management plans should have broad representation from the community including interests such as local water districts and utilities, cities and towns, scientific experts, agriculture, industrial, business, and conservation groups. Local elected officials should have input into the makeup of the council.
- **What programs and tools should councils be able to select from?** The counties and local advisory councils should be enabled to select from a variety of water conservation tools that would be enacted for their use at their discretion. (See sidebar.)

A variety of conservation tools could be made available to counties and local advisory councils—for example:

- Provide funding for voluntary, compensated land and water conservation plans to conserve and augment groundwater supplies.
- Establish a local program to build and manage infrastructure to recharge aquifers and to allow water users to store water underground for later use.
- Restrict large new wells that will unreasonably impact a community's or town's drinking water supplies or sensitive environmental areas, or that are likely to cause unreasonable declines in the water levels in neighboring wells.
- Establish water conservation programs that apply to those who withdraw, distribute, or receive groundwater to achieve reductions in groundwater usage.
- Establish programs that allow large new groundwater uses to be "offset" through reductions in water use nearby, or through projects to replenish the aquifer in order to stabilize local water levels.

Groundwater conservation tools have been developed around the West to protect basins at risk and meet community needs. For additional examples of possible tools, see the Water for Arizona Coalition's guide to "[Tools for Local Groundwater Management](#)," available at waterforarizona.com/groundwater.

The Water for Arizona Coalition is comprised of Arizonans who support policies and innovative practices to ensure a reliable water supply to meet the state's needs. Collectively, we have over 60,000 Arizona members, as well as hundreds of hunter, angler, business, and outdoor recreation partners around the state. Learn more at waterforarizona.com.