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Editorials & Opinion: Guest columnist

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Growth loads strain on Arizona water supply

Arizona is renowned for its Western heritage and stunning natural beauty. It can also rightly be proud of its dynamic cities, vibrant tribal communities and enviable lifestyles.

Like much of the West, however, Arizona faces major natural resource challenges, including securing an adequate supply of water to meet its needs.

Between 1990 and 2000, Arizona experienced a 40 percent population growth rate, three times the national average. By 2025, the state is expected to have 6.4 million people, up from 4.2 million people in 1995.

This rapid growth has created uncertainty about future water supplies. That's one reason why Phoenix is a fitting locale for federal water officials to meet on Tuesday with state and local leaders to discuss how they can work together to help prevent the water supply problems facing many Arizona communities.

The goals of the conference, "Water 2025: Preventing Crises and Conflict in the West," are:

- To identify areas facing the greatest potential risk in the next 25 years.
- To evaluate the most effective and attainable ways of addressing the challenges.
- To recommend realistic approaches and tools that have the most likelihood of success. The conference is one of nine similar sessions being held in Western cities this summer.

Water 2025 recognizes that states, tribes, local governments and the affected communities have the leading role in this effort and sets out a blueprint to work with these partners on pragmatic, locally based solutions.

The Interior Department can help with technical expertise, facilitate support and provide seed money, focusing scarce federal resources where they provide the greatest benefits. President Bush's fiscal 2004 budget calls for an initial investment of \$11 million.

Two of the realities driving water supply problems in the West are explosive population growth and competing demands for finite supplies.

Almost all of the Indian tribes in Arizona are facing water supply challenges, as are many of its rural communities.

In almost every instance, there are significant endangered-species issues that must be addressed in concert with the water supply shortage.

Major droughts, such as the one Arizona has been experiencing in recent years, intensify these problems, increasing the potential for conflict.

Federal efforts to help Arizona meet its 20th-century water needs led to large-scale initiatives, such as the Salt River Project and the Central Arizona Project, which have played a vital role in the state's growth.

Today, the Interior Department and other federal agencies are engaged with Sen. Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., in an effort to achieve a global water-rights settlement that would resolve several long-standing water issues in the state.

Interior is also helping protect environmental jewels such as the San Pedro River, the last un-dammed riparian stream in Arizona, by establishing the San Pedro National Conservation Area as a home for the endangered Southwest Willow Flycatcher and endangered native fish.

To its credit, Arizona is carrying out major water conservation programs throughout the state. Tucson has long had an active water conservation program, and in recent years the Phoenix area and other communities have greatly increased their awareness campaigns.

Arizona water management entities have gone to great lengths to ensure their water storage and delivery systems are modernized, lining canals and automating pumping and canal controls to help conserve substantial amounts of water.

By getting ahead of the crisis/conflict curve, we can help to meet the needs of the people and the environment of Arizona.

Doing nothing is an option, but only if we are willing to accept the drastic consequences that follow.

Gale Norton is secretary of the Interior Department. More on "Water 2025" is at www.doi.gov/water2025.