

## WE MUST INVEST TO BE SUSTAINABLE?

By Jim Holway for the *Arizona Republic*  
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I am often asked: Are our current growth and water use “sustainable?” This simple question does not have a simple answer.

First, we have many options on how we choose to use our water. Second, the backdrop against which we view our water supply and use is constantly changing—our population continues to expand, our economy grows, our desires and expectations evolve, and we respond to any number of external events, including new technologies, global climate, and energy availability. Third, sustainability can be defined and measured in different ways with differing results.

Arizona, like most other regions of the world, initially developed through exploiting its natural resources, often at rates that would deplete the region over time. A key sustainability challenge is to look far enough into the future to anticipate the needs for new resources, technologies, and even changes in our behavior. We will need the ability to make adjustments in a timely manner and avoid crossing critical thresholds that could result in unacceptable or irreversible damage to our environment, economy, and

community. Groundwater overuse, for example, could dewater an aquifer and compact the aquifer's underground structure. This overuse could lead to permanent loss of water storage capacity, increased vulnerability to drought, drying up of streams, or even land subsidence and fissuring. All of these scenarios have occurred in Arizona.

Sustainable management becomes increasingly complex as population growth and lifestyle changes place higher demands on resources. To meet that demand, we must increase our investments in new water resources, physical infrastructure, and social institutions; otherwise we won't be able to maintain our region's ability to respond to changes. One of Arizona's political challenges is that many of our leaders miss this fundamental relationship. They want to allow continued growth, but do not want to invest in the tools needed to effectively manage and serve our increasingly complex communities.

Arizona has made significant advances in linking water and growth to address long-term sustainability. These include requiring Arizona's larger or faster-growing local governments to consider water adequacy in their long-range plans; rules that require a “100-year renewable water supply” before land can be subdivided within Active Management Areas, and; last year's legislation allowing cities and towns (as well as counties, if they have a unanimous vote of their county supervisors) to adopt an ordinance requiring new subdivisions to have a 100-year water supply.

During the coming year, Arizona's leaders will be considering major growth-management, transportation and water-management initiatives. My hope is that we will, in fact, look far into the future to envision and plan for strong and healthy communities and that we will be willing to invest to make it happen.

My not-so-short list of priority goals for assuring a sustainable Arizona water supply include:

- Develop long-range water-demand projections along with information on water supplies;
- Forge regional partnerships to coordinate long-range watershed and aquifer management;
- Secure future supplies;
- Understand and prepare for climatic variability and global climate change;
- Modify the state's regulatory framework and water-management organizations to evolve with continued growth, to require water adequacy in both urban and rural areas, and to facilitate water transfers; and
- Address environmental quality, ecosystem health, and quality-of-life concerns related to water management.

***Jim Holway, former Assistant Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources, is a Professor of Practice and Director of the Sustainability Partnership at ASU's Global Institute of Sustainability.***

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