Commentary: Water conservation bill a win for Arizona’s rivers, businesses

Chip Norton

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As a resident of the Town of Camp Verde and President of Sinagua Malt, Arizona’s first local barley malting operation, I have a big stake in the health of both Arizona’s rivers and Arizona’s economy.

By removing barriers to water conservation, a bill before the Arizona Legislature (HB 2056/SB 1368) recognizes that a sustainable water future in Arizona leads to a sustainable economy.

Recreation on Arizona’s rivers, lakes, and streams contributes $13.5 billion to the state’s economy each year, while farming contributes some $20 billion to the state’s economy annually.

Both recreation and agriculture depend on water being in rivers, lakes, and streams in order to provide economic benefits.

On top of that, our water resources support some of the most incredible wildlife and habitat diversity in the country. The Verde River alone supports over 200 species of birds.

The bill corrects an outdated policy that water users utilize the entirety of their water, or lose a portion of their water rights.

This new legislation would allow a river water user to conserve water on their property — by switching to less thirsty crops or upgrading irrigation systems for example — and be confident that any water saved would not be subject to “use it or lose it” policies based on non-use.

In fact, this bill encourages conservation by eliminating the fear of forfeiture for doing the right thing. In this way, the proposed law would protect people, their water rights, and our rivers.

Saved water is a win for farms and rivers alike, and that is why both Arizona’s farming and conservation communities have put their support behind this bill.

We need this win-win approach to sustaining both healthy rivers and a healthy economy.

At my company, Sinagua Malt, we malt Verde Valley-grown barley from Hauser and Hauser Farms and heritage wheat from the Yavapai-Apache Nation.
By swapping from more water-intensive crops to barley and wheat, our agricultural partners use less water. In addition, wheat and barley are harvested in the summer — the same time at which more thirsty crops like corn and alfalfa require the bulk of their watering.

The early summer is also when flow in Arizona’s rivers are at their lowest, so by switching to barley, farms can reduce their water use, and leave more water in the river when it is needed the most.

This legislation removes a major barrier to the innovative water conservation practices that will be critical to sustaining Arizona in a hotter, drier future.

I encourage Arizona’s legislature to listen to the state’s farmers and conservationists — modify our water forfeiture rules and pass this bill.

**Chip Norton is the president of Sinagua Malt in Camp Verde.**