

## **Opinion: Arizona Just Took a Bold Step Toward a Smarter Water Future**

By Fred Schneider

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Arizona just made water policy history.

With the signing of Senate Bill 1611 by Governor Katie Hobbs, our state has adopted a smart, forward-thinking solution to one of our most pressing challenges: how to ensure water security while sustaining responsible growth. This new “ag-to-urban” water legislation is not only a major milestone for Pinal and Phoenix’s Active Management Areas (AMAs), but it also marks a turning point in how Arizona balances development, water conservation and long-term sustainability.

The concept is straightforward yet revolutionary. The legislation allows groundwater credits from *voluntarily* retired farmland to be used to support new residential developments—effectively transitioning water from agriculture to urban use in a way that reduces overall groundwater consumption. Importantly, this conversion is entirely voluntary. It provides farmers with the option to participate, giving them the flexibility to transition land and water rights in a way that aligns with their personal and business goals. There is no mandate – only opportunity for those who chose to use it.

This is a well-structured, bipartisan effort that took more than two years of negotiation among farmers, builders, tribal communities, conservationists, city leaders, and water providers—including Arizona Water Company.

Why does this matter? Because farmland typically consumes 4 to 6 acre-feet of water per year, while homes use just 1 to 1.5 acre-feet. By enabling this voluntary shift, Arizona is setting up a framework that saves groundwater, supports economic opportunity and ensures that development is tied to a verified, sustainable water supply.

As Mayor Lisa Navarro Fitzgibbons of Casa Grande put it, this is a “win-win” for our water future. And she’s right. This policy means homes can be built for Arizona families—without jeopardizing the long-term health of our aquifers.

It also means that we no longer need to view growth and conservation as opposing forces. With robust safeguards in place, including mandatory groundwater replenishment and tight oversight of how credits are used, SB 1611 ensures we grow smartly, not recklessly.

Additionally, the legislation includes a significant step forward for southern Arizona. The new Groundwater Savings Program for the Tucson AMA empowers the Director of the Arizona Department of Water Resources (ADWR) to adopt rules to implement a groundwater savings program tailored to the Tucson region. This includes setting the

parameters necessary to ensure meaningful groundwater savings—if the Director determines that certain outlined conditions apply. It's a flexible but focused approach that ensures conservation tools are regionally appropriate and data-driven.

We're proud that Arizona Water Company was part of the coalition that made this happen. We serve more than 300,000 Arizonans across 18 communities, and we know firsthand the urgency of delivering water solutions that protect both people and our state .

This isn't the end of the conversation—it's the beginning of a new era in how Arizona manages its most precious resource. Now, the real work begins: implementing this policy responsibly, transparently and with the same spirit of collaboration that brought it to life.

In a time when states across the West are struggling with divisive and outdated approaches to water management, Arizona just showed what's possible when we come together.

Let's keep the momentum going.