

https://www.verdenews.com/news/camp-verde-bugle/former-gov-babbitt-cautions-increasing-water-levels-on-bartlett-lake-could-threaten-verde-river-watershed/article_8c53d05e-7abc-11ef-8971-df4c9c1ed4f8.html

FEATURED

Former Gov. Babbitt cautions increasing water levels on Bartlett Lake could threaten Verde River watershed

By STEVE SHADLEY The Verde Independent
Sep 28, 2024



Former Arizona Gov. Bruce Babbitt delivered the keynote address at the 2024 State of the Verde Watershed Conference at Cliff Castle Casino and Hotel in Camp Verde on Tuesday, Sept.24, 2024. (VNN/Steve Shadley)

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

CAMP VERDE — Former Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt has warned that efforts to raise water levels on Arizona’s Bartlett Lake will put additional pressures on the Verde River.

Babbitt outlined his concerns during his keynote speech at the 2024 State of the Verde Watershed Conference in Camp Verde on Tuesday, Sept. 24.

"Raising the height of the dam by about 100 feet is an OK idea. An awful lot of surplus water will be captured for Phoenix and it will have support from water users in the Salt River Valley but mitigation is important before the infrastructure is built," Babbitt told an audience at Cliff Castle Casino and Hotel.

The former U.S. Interior Secretary and 1988 Democratic presidential candidate urged conservationists, stakeholders, tribal and business leaders as well as politicians to create a partnership to lobby Congress to designate the Upper Verde as a "wild and scenic" river as part of any deal that would give Salt River Project (SRP) permission to nearly double the size of Bartlett Lake.

SRP is involved in a study to determine whether the dam could be built for an estimated cost of up to \$860-million according to estimates.

"We need to be thinking about this and how it will emerge because when it does happen you will have the power to shape real mitigation," Babbitt added. "The west bank of the Verde at Bartlett Dam is wide open to increasing pressures such as roads and that kind of stuff. A conservation area on the west side of the Verde is crucial."

He explained the east side of the Verde Watershed at Bartlett Lake Dam is a protected riparian habitat.

"The west side should be a national conservation area, congressionally designated for public lands which limits road building and further development. That would be a part of my mitigation wish list," Babbitt announced.

Bartlett Lake is reservoir located about 50 miles away from downtown Phoenix and is a popular recreation area created after SRP dammed the Verde River in 1936 when construction on the original dam started in the Tonto National Forest.

Babbitt remembered back to when he was serving as Arizona Governor in 1980 as efforts were underway to approve the proposed water storage Orme Dam at the confluence of the Verde and Salt Rivers. As a part of the original plan to construct the Orme Dam, the Fort McDowell Apache reservation would have been flooded out and Babbitt noted some officials called for relocating the Fort McDowell Apache community.

Babbitt added that when then-President Jimmy Carter found out about the possible relocation of the tribal members he threatened to cancel the entire Central Arizona Project or CAP. Babbitt said President Carter's vow got the attention of Arizona's congressional delegation and a compromise was reached that resulted in the construction of the New Waddell Dam for water storage and the Fort McDowell Apache were allowed to stay on their land east of Scottsdale.

Babbitt said as a part of those negotiations more than 40 years ago he vowed not to accept the deal unless \$2 million was set aside to restore the Verde River.

"After the \$2 million was allocated, I then thought to myself, 'How are we going to spend this money?' So, we got a few people together to hike the banks of the Verde, and I was struck by the amount of litter and junk that was strewn across its banks at Dead Horse State Park where we started our tour, and that was the moment we decided to create the Verde Greenway," Babbitt reminisced.

"That's a great example of mitigation and how it can work to your advantage. That's what we should be thinking about for the future of the Verde as they move ahead with plans to raise the dam at Bartlett Lake," he said.

Babbitt also cautioned about the overdevelopment of shallow wells built on the floodplain of the Upper Verde at Big Chino.

"If that basin is depleted and left wide open unregulated, it will be the end of the Verde River. We are only now beginning to wake to that reality. We have to better manage the underground water resources of the Big Chino Valley," Babbitt said.

He urged water planners and resource managers to relocate wells to higher elevations and drill deeper wells outside of the Big Chino area in hopes the surface waters of the Verde can continue flowing.

"In this effort we must persuade the public and legislators that Big Chino must be preserved for conservation. That's the most important singular task for us all," Babbitt continued. "The U.S. Geological Survey tells us that there are some 3,000 shallow wells along this part of the Upper Verde floodplain pumping groundwater.

"The people who have wells in this area don't need to panic. Something will be figured out but water companies and cities that are water providers with wells in this floodplain are going to have to come to reality," Babbitt added. "We have to work together to make sure Prescott doesn't reach up to grab all of that water. There is nothing like what you are doing on the Verde River that is going on anywhere else in the country, and the need for partnerships is real. So, have at it."

The 2024 State of the Verde Watershed Conference wrapped up Thursday, Sept. 26, and included workshops on storm management, wildlife and riparian habitat protection, and innovations in ranching and farming. The conference was organized by Friends of the Verde River in collaboration with The Nature Conservancy. The conference's theme was "Ripples of Impact — Strengthening Watershed Partnerships."

Contact Steve Shadley at sshadley@verdenews.com