

From conversation to action: ASU-led workshop advances groundwater solutions in southeastern Arizona

By Faith Kearns, ASU News
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Community leaders, farmers and ranchers, [homesteaders](#), agency staff and nonprofit partners gathered in Willcox, Arizona, for an action-oriented [water workshop](#) last month.

Located in the heart of the Sulphur Springs Valley in the southeastern corner of the state, Willcox sits within a closed groundwater basin shaped by generations of agriculture. Because nearly all water in the region comes from groundwater, local decisions carry long-term consequences, making collaboration and action essential.

The workshop, co-organized by [Impact Water – Arizona](#), a pillar of the [Arizona Water Innovation Initiative](#), a statewide project led by ASU's Julie Ann Wrigley Global Futures Laboratory in collaboration with the Ira A. Fulton Schools of Engineering, was designed with that reality in mind. Co-hosted with the [Sulphur Springs Water Alliance](#), the workshop followed on the heels of related rural groundwater workshops in [La Paz](#), [Coconino](#) and [Santa Cruz](#) counties.

Opening the day, [Susan Craig](#), director of Impact Water – Arizona, described the workshop as a “full-circle moment,” noting an [earlier gathering](#) her team co-organized in the area not only led to the development of the Sulphur Springs Water Alliance, but also helped inspire a broader series of rural groundwater resilience workshops across Arizona.

Ed Curry, a local chile farmer and breeder, emphasized that progress begins with dialogue. “It’s all about the conversations,” Curry said.

He also reminded participants that groundwater recovery is possible. During the agricultural downturn of the 1980s, widespread fallowing led to measurable groundwater rebound in the valley. “We know it’s possible to bring groundwater levels up again,” he said.

Science to inform action

Amid a series of major developments, including the creation of an active management area and a [state settlement](#) with Riverview Dairy, a major goal of the workshop was to prioritize actions that the Sulphur Springs Water Alliance can take to encourage further groundwater protection in the area. Scientific presentations provided a clear-eyed assessment of the valley's groundwater systems, recharge potential and the constraints within which action must occur.

Neha Gupta from the U of A [Arizona Institute for Resilience](#) raised several key realities including that recharge varies widely across space and time and that stormwater recharge, while promising, is episodic and limited.

Jackie Watkins, Cochise County engineer, shared results from a county-led study exploring opportunities to pair managed aquifer recharge with flood mitigation. The analysis identified numerous promising locations, shifting the conversation from whether recharge is possible to where it might be most effective.

Pairing data with local knowledge

After the technical presentations, participants moved into hands-on work, looking carefully at sites the county had identified and adding their own expertise on potential recharge locations. Large-format maps were spread across tables as farmers and ranchers, local officials, conservation groups and agency staff overlaid data with lived experience.

The goal was to narrow a long list of potential parcels down to approximately five priority sites for further investigation and potential project development. As several participants noted, meaningful recharge projects often require coordination among multiple landowners, reinforcing the importance of relationships and trust.

The connection between water planning and lived experience was underscored by the perspective of family farmers in the valley. Tina Dunlap, whose family — including her children, their spouses and increasingly her grandchildren — farms north of Willcox in the Bonita area, spoke about the realities of working the land and the responsibility she feels to her community.

“We’re out here doing this every day,” Dunlap said, describing a diversified operation that grows corn, cotton, alfalfa, pinto beans and wheat, with lots of experimentation along the way. “We don’t have to go to Vegas,” she joked, “we gamble every single day out here.”

Gatherings like this matter, she says, because they help bridge the gap between farmers and the public.

“I love my kids and my grandkids, and I love this town,” she said. “I want people to understand where their food comes from, but I also want our community to be thoughtful about the water decisions we’re making, because they affect all of us.”

Infrastructure, governance and a larger vision

The workshop also highlighted the role of municipalities in shaping the valley's water future for all local residents. Caleb Blaschke of the city of Willcox shared how the city has addressed immediate infrastructure needs of homeowners while planning for longer-term challenges.

Willcox has secured approximately \$10 million in Water Infrastructure Finance Authority funding to plan for the creation of a new water district, repair wells, replace smart irrigation systems in parks and drill an additional well.

Looking ahead, the city is turning its attention to rural water challenges beyond city limits. Willcox owns wells several miles outside the city that supply all residents and businesses, while surrounding communities rely on a patchwork of rural water districts.

"Water problems require a larger vision," Blaschke said, "not just how do we address everything immediately."

Momentum for what comes next

The workshop provided an opportunity to reflect on the community's groundwater work over the past couple of years and the progress of the Sulphur Springs Water Alliance, which has been crucial in keeping the momentum and is serving as a model for other areas across the state.

"As a result of the workshop, we now have four potential project concepts to begin building out for 2026, as well as 23 potential sites identified for future project work and on-the-ground site visits," Sulphur Springs Water Alliance Director Katherine Hamberger said. "This gives us a strong foundation to start prioritizing next steps and exploring where our efforts can have the greatest impact."

By the end of the day, participants left with renewed energy and a clearer sense of direction. More than anything, the workshop marked a shift from planning to doing. In the Sulphur Springs Valley, the conversation is no longer about whether action is needed, but about how, where and with whom that action begins.

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



The Willcox area is a high desert grassland valley with agricultural fields surrounded by mountains. Local residents and leaders gathered to plan for groundwater action. Photos by Faith Kearns

Text image(s)



Ed Curry, a Chilean farmer in the Willcox area, opened the workshop. Photo by Faith Kearns



Jackie Watkins of Cochise County presents the results of a county study on managed aquifer recharge locations. Photo by Faith Kearns



Workshop participants had animated discussions about the potential groundwater recharge sites identified by a county study. Photos by Faith Kearns



Family farmer Tina Dunlap (center) listens to Ed Curry during a breakout session at the workshop in Willcox. Photo by Faith Kearns



Participants prioritize strategies and discuss project implementation. Photos by Faith Kearns