

Home developer to ban some water softeners

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A leading Valley developer is going green in several of its planned communities by banning conventional water-softening systems that produce high levels of salt.

The plan by the Ellman Cos. would affect an estimated 6,000 planned homes in Goodyear and Fountain Hills.

The result, according to Ellman, is cleaner water in environmentally sensitive parts of the Valley. The Phoenix-based company said it is the first in Arizona to consider the policy, which would force home builders to use newer water-softening technology that is better for the environment.

How the systems work

Water-softening systems are common in Arizona, where the water often is extremely hard.

They work by stripping "hard" calcium and magnesium ions from the water, resulting in "soft" water that cleans better and doesn't leave scaly deposits.

But certain types of systems generate leftover chemicals, which critics say contaminates water and soil.

Don Kile, president of master-planned communities for Ellman, said newer systems capture more chemicals before they make their way into the sewer system.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says that water softeners can generate a backwash high in sodium, magnesium and calcium. But their impact on the environment is not completely known.

Many tests on the subject have been inconclusive, according to the EPA's National Risk Management Research Laboratory.

3 affected communities

Ellman would impose the water-softening ban at three planned communities:

- Goodyear's King Ranch, a 1,860-acre plot south of the Gila River.
- The Preserve at Goldfield Ranch, 1,000 homes east of Fountain Hills in unincorporated Maricopa County.
- Fountain Hills' former state trust land, 1,450 homes on the north side of town.

The effort mirrors laws in California, where some cities have banned or restricted certain types of water softeners.

Kile said Ellman is "not going to wait for governmental entities to enact ordinances and legislation" in Arizona.

"We're going to do our share, and we're going to do it up front," Kile said.

The effort could bode well for Ellman, which has its share of critics in the water realm.

The developer's Preserve at Goldfield Ranch has raised concerns with the Salt River Project and the Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, who maintain that drilling wells for the project could affect the flow of the nearby Verde River.

Kile said the company plans to enact a cost-cutting irrigation system for its Fountain Hills development, in which treated water could be used to irrigate nearby parks that now rely on more expensive potable water.