

Why river advocates say Arizona's upper Verde should earn 'Wild and Scenic' protections

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From a few thousand feet in the air, the upper Verde River carves a stark contrast into the desert surrounding it. Its verdant green ribbon twists through an otherwise arid, rocky landscape. Leafy trees and vegetation line the river banks, allowing glimpses of the water flowing beneath.

In the cockpit of a six-seat propeller plane, representatives from regional, Indigenous and state governments cram together for an overhead perspective of a decades-long campaign to protect this stretch of the Verde.

As the river's base flows continue to decline, organizers worry the upper Verde's lush ecosystem may eventually disappear. The flights are among of the latest efforts by the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River Coalition to gather support to protect the river with a Wild and Scenic River Designation.

The designation, which requires congressional action, adds federal protection to free-flowing rivers with exceptional natural, cultural and recreational values.

Wild and Scenic status would allow land managers to improve or maintain river water supplies and quality, prohibiting future dams or diversions without limiting existing water rights.

The designation would protect 76 river miles and over 24,000 acres of riverside lands. It would promote recreational activities, protect fish and wildlife, and most importantly, supporters say, prevent the river from drying up in the decades to come.

The coalition has gained backing from numerous cities and towns in Yavapai County and the Yavapai-Apache Nation, and they hope to persuade Arizona's federal lawmakers to introduce a bill next year.

Activists partnered with EcoFlight, an eco-tourism nonprofit that advocates for protections on wildlands using small aircraft, to bring officials and legislators together to see the river and to garner support.

"When you're in the plane, you have a lot in common. You're physically touching even when you might have people from opposite sides of the aisle," said Jane Pargiter, the executive director of EcoFlight. "They visually identify what they're talking about instead of an abstract in maps or paperwork, and it's mind changing."

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What is a Wild and Scenic River designation?

The upper Verde would join two Arizona rivers that have received Wild and Scenic designation. A 40.5-mile expanse of the Lower Verde River was protected in 1984, and in 2009, a 16.8-mile stretch of Fossil Creek was added to the system.

Since the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed in 1968, over 220 rivers have been added to the system, covering more than 13,400 miles of waterways across America.

Congress passed the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act when dam-building was at a high. Lawmakers wanted to balance constructing dams with preserving free-flowing rivers that have "outstandingly remarkable values."

These values, also known as ORVs, are aspects of a river that are rare, unique or exemplary to the region or nation overall, and include scenery, recreational opportunities, unique geological features, essential fish and wildlife habitats, prehistory sites with ties to Native Americans, historical sites, and other values like hydrology, paleontology or botanical resources.



To receive the designation, a river must be deemed eligible by the federal land management agency that oversees it and have one or more ORVs. The Prescott National Forest confirmed the upper Verde's eligibility, finding seven ORVs.

Then Congress can pass legislation that is signed into law by the president

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Organizers believe the upper Verde is a prime candidate to join the Wild and Scenic Rivers system.

“If the framers of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act had a river envisioned when they wrote that legislation, it could have been this river. It fits perfectly,” said Gary Beverly, the chair of the Yavapai Group of the Sierra Club.

On the Verde: How an Arizona river became a water conservation success story, for now

Support is widespread for protecting the Verde

Members and supporters of the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River Coalition believe the designation is essential to preserving the upper Verde.

Two factors affect water flow in a river: flood flows from local precipitation or snowmelt, and base flow from groundwater or springs seeping into the river bed. While water from precipitation can be sporadic, base flow is perennial and sustains rivers year-round.

The Verde River’s base flow has declined since the 1990s, due to increased groundwater pumping and climate change. Advocacy groups fear that if the rate of decline continues, the Verde will dry up in a few decades.

“It’s important because this is the last living, perennial river in the state of Arizona,” Beverly said. “The Colorado, the Gila, the Santa Cruz and the Salt have been deeply compromised by dams and diversions of groundwater pumping.”

The upper Verde River flows from Sullivan Dam near Paulden and extends to Clarkdale. The coalition’s proposal includes 44.5 miles of the upper Verde, 1.6 miles of lower Granite Creek and 28 miles of Sycamore Creek, totaling 74.1 miles.

Protection would benefit the entire river, as the upper Verde supplies one-third of the water flowing through the Verde Valley.

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In its eligibility report on the upper Verde, the Prescott National Forest recognized seven ORVs applicable to the river: scenic, fishery, wildlife, cultural and historic, recreational, geologic and botanic.

Multiple towns and cities support the designation, including Camp Verde, Chino Valley, Clarkdale, Cottonwood, Jerome, Prescott, Prescott Valley and Sedona.

Over 100 local businesses and 18 partner and supporting conservation organizations have also expressed support, including American Rivers, Sierra Club's Grand Canyon Chapter and Friends of the Verde River.

The Yavapai-Apache Nation has signed a letter of support for the designation and will provide input and assist in managing the river under the designation.

Nancy Ruiz, an environmental protection supervisor for the Environmental Protection Department of the Yavapai-Apache Nation, said the upper Verde was a lifeline to the Yavapai and Apache people historically and continues to be culturally significant today.

“As we’ve remained here, we still continue to uphold our traditional practices, stay involved with stewardship and ensure we protect the land that helped us survive back in the day,” she said.

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Maintaining or improving the upper Verde

Although landowners and parties with water rights to the upper Verde may fear that a Wild and Scenic designation could limit their access, supporters say protections would not affect current uses.

The act ensures the free-flowing character of rivers as they are at designation, allowing existing uses for private property, water rights and grazing permits to continue.

“A lot of times people are really concerned that some kind of federal designation is going to be like Big Brother and black helicopters swooping in and controlling things you value,” said Beverly. “That’s not the case. Recreation access will be maintained or improved.”

Access for recreation, hunting and fishing will continue, and the public would be involved in planning river management.

Fish and wildlife habitats would be better protected under the designation. The upper Verde is an essential riparian zone, which is land along the edges of rivers and streams that is influenced by the presence of water.

Riparian areas provide food, cover and water for a variety of animals and are a stopping point for migratory species during their travels.

The Verde River supports a large percentage of Arizona’s wildlife, including 78% of breeding bird species, 89% of bat and carnivore species and 76% of reptiles and amphibians. Nine of the 22 native fish listed under the Endangered Species Act in Arizona inhabit the Verde River.

Activists believe a Wild and Scenic designation would allow more resources for monitoring and managing these ORVs, while ensuring existing water rights are respected.

In March, representatives from the coalition will travel to Washington, D.C., to present their proposal to Arizona delegates during Wild and Scenic Rivers Hill Week. Their goal is to persuade delegates to introduce a bill establishing the designation.

“Something that makes the upper Verde really special is that people across the spectrum of political beliefs, cultural associations and areas really share the feeling that it’s an important area to protect,” said Rachel Ellis, an associate director for American Rivers’ Southwest River Protection Program. “It’s not particularly controversial.”

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