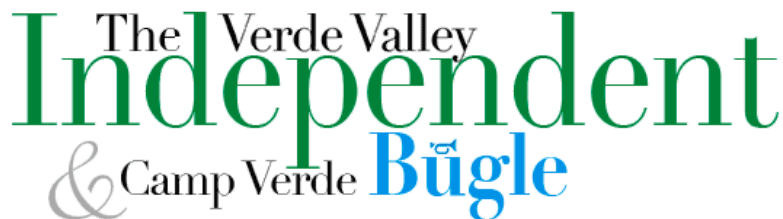


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Upper Verde River Wild and Scenic idea resurfaces

By Joanna Dodder Nellans

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The idea of creating a Wild and Scenic Upper [Verde River](#) is surfacing in two parallel efforts.

The Sierra Club is working on a detailed proposal it hopes the U.S. Congress and president will approve.

At the same time, the [Prescott National Forest](#) is reviving its analysis of the Wild and Scenic idea as part of its forest management plan revision process.

"This is a green artery pulsing through the heart of Arizona," said the Sierra Club's Gary Beverly of Chino Valley, who is spearheading work on the group's 250-page proposal. "This is a resource every person in this state should be proud of."

Beverly is presenting the proposal at a free public meeting at 7 p.m. Tuesday at the Prescott Public Library. He will use a PowerPoint presentation to show photos of the river and explain the club's proposal. He also will answer questions and hear audience ideas about how to improve the draft proposal.

The Sierra Club wants a Wild and Scenic designation for the upper 48.6 miles of the Verde, from the headwaters near Paulden to a spot above Clarkdale, where the river flows out of the Prescott National Forest into private land in the Verde Valley.

All but two miles of that stretch of the river are located on the Prescott National Forest.

The 10,800-acre proposal runs rim-to-rim along the Upper Verde River Canyon, except it's narrower on the two miles where it runs through three private properties so it won't affect ranchers' abilities to maintain and build ranch structures, Beverly said. In those areas, it would cover only the river's 100-year floodplain.

"Ranchers are part of Arizona's history and tradition, and we respect their role," Beverly said. "I have designed a proposal that stays out of their way as much as possible."

The proposal would not affect Prescott's plans to use Big Chino groundwater that feeds the Upper Verde, added Beverly, who has taken his fight against Prescott's Big Chino pipeline plan to court in the past.

"The main thing people are asking is, 'How would this affect the pipeline,' and of course it has nothing to do with that," agreed Tom Slaback, president of the local Yavapai Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Federal law features three levels of Wild and Scenic protections: wild, scenic and recreational. The Sierra Club and Forest Service both are considering a combination of these levels for the Upper Verde, depending on the amount of pre-existing development at particular locations.

The federal government cannot be involved in building new roads or dams in areas at the "wild" designation level. So, for example, the state could not build a highway over

the headwaters, something that a regional freeway plan has considered in recent years.

Both the Forest Service and Sierra Club are considering state instream flow rights for the river, too. The Sierra Club wants to protect the five-year median flow at the headwaters near Paulden, Beverly said. Any such rights would be junior to older water rights.

Long history

The idea of a Wild and Scenic Upper Verde River has a long history with the U.S. Forest Service, which first considered the suitability of the designation for the upper and lower stretches of the Verde River in 1982 at the request of Congress.

After receiving strong opposition to the Upper Verde portion of that draft plan, the Forest Service dropped the Upper Verde from its proposal, said Beverly, who has reviewed hundreds of pages of historical documents for the Sierra Club study.

Congress designated the lower 50 miles of the Verde River as Wild and Scenic in 1984. It took the Forest Service another 20 years to write up a management plan.

In 1985 the Forest Service applied for a lower Verde River instream flow right from the Arizona Department of Water Resources, and the agency granted it.

In 1988 the Forest Service applied for an Upper Verde instream flow right, too (a minimum of 24 cubic feet per second at Paulden and 60 cfs at Clarkdale). But while the agency was trying to appease protesters, the Phelps Dodge (now Freeport McMoRan) mining company challenged the state's right to grant instream flow rights and that lawsuit held up that process. The mining company still is holding up applications with another related lawsuit, Beverly said.

If the Upper Verde ever gets its flow rights, they would date back to 1988.

Another 1993 Forest Service review again concluded the Upper Verde is appropriate for Wild and Scenic designation, all under the recreational category, Prescott National Forest Planner Sally Hess-Samuelsan said.

The fact that the Upper Verde is eligible for such a designation means the Forest Service must protect those Wild and Scenic qualities, she noted.

In 2008 The Nature Conservancy and the Arizona Game and Fish Departments also applied for instream flow rights through their Upper Verde properties, Beverly said.

Since Prescott Forest officials are revising their management plan and Upper Verde conditions have changed, the Forest Service is once again reviewing the river section's eligibility for a Wild and Scenic designation, she said. The agency's draft report could be available soon.

Since earlier reviews, some private land has converted to public land, a gas company built a pipeline under the Upper Verde, and the Forest Service has decommissioned numerous roads leading into the Upper Verde, she noted.

The Forest Service also has outlawed vehicular travel to the Upper Verde, a delicate ecosystem that is home to threatened and endangered fish.

"The changes have made it even more eligible," Hess-Samuels said. And parts could qualify for higher protections than the recreational category, she added.

However, the Prescott Forest won't start working on a more detailed Upper Verde study until the management plan is done in several years.

Sierra Club officials agree that the Upper Verde's condition has changed, and they believe now is the perfect time to get Wild and Scenic protections for the Upper Verde.

A Sierra Club ecological study has concluded that 70 percent of all Arizona invertebrates live in the Verde Watershed even though only 6 percent of the state's land sits in the watershed. That shows just how ecologically important it is, Beverly said.

The club is seeking support for its proposal from the public and various agencies.

The City of Prescott and the [Salt River Project](#), which holds senior water rights on the Verde River for its Phoenix-area customers, already have expressed general support for a Wild and Scenic Upper Verde and a minimum streamflow in an agreement they co-signed earlier this year.

Sen. John McCain told *The Daily Courier* that widespread support would be necessary for Arizona's Congressional delegation to introduce the legislation.

"Once this is designated, we'll have a resilient riparian habitat 160 miles long," said Beverly, pointing to other public lands along the Verde. "So there is a larger purpose... of completing this wildlife corridor.

"It's important on a national scale."

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