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FEATURED

Future of Verde watershed is focus of 3-day conference in Camp Verde

By STEVE SHADLEY The Verde Independent
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Friends of the Verde River Executive Director David Gressly in Cottonwood on Friday, Sept. 20, 2024. (VWN/Steve Shadley)

COTTONWOOD — Environmentalists, water experts, community leaders and wildlife enthusiasts will gather in Camp Verde Tuesday to Thursday, Sept. 24-26, for the 2024 State of the Verde Watershed Conference.

"The meeting will encourage discussion among people who love the Verde River to come together to share their common concerns about this wonderful natural resource," said David Gressly, executive director of "Friends of the Verde River."

The Verde Watershed Conference is held every two years, and this year, Gressly will share a core message with stakeholders and conservationists.

"I want to stress partnership, to further build a coalition to encourage preservation of the Verde. We want community engagement and we want to expand business support to reach an overall goal of preserving this resource. We need to work together on this issue," Gressly told the Verde Independent.

"Friends of the Verde River" along with The Nature Conservancy and other groups are coming together to identify challenges and identify solutions to ensure the Verde River is protected for future generations.

"Twenty-Five percent of the water that goes to the Phoenix area comes from the Verde River. It's a vital lifeline for everything downstream, it is important for agriculture, for recreation, for business. We want to stress the need for more involvement from the Phoenix area, this is not just a Verde Valley issue, it goes beyond that," Gressly added.

He stressed the need for more conservation and public awareness.

"One of the methods to further conserve is to encourage farmers to update their irrigation infrastructure so there isn't a lot of waste. The agriculture industry already is taking advantage of technology to improve the knowledge of how to much to irrigate and when. Some of the infrastructure they depend on is aging and needs updating and there are programs to help them do that. This is all voluntary but we need to educate them about the options," he said.

Gressly said another priority is to get more support behind efforts to designate the Verde River as a wild and scenic waterway that would require support from Arizona's congressional delegation to get a measure approved on Capitol Hill. He expressed concern about decreasing water flows on the Verde River as a result of a stubborn drought that has been around since the 1990's.

"The community is also doing quite a bit including counting otters that live along the riverbanks. We have identified about 100 otters currently live in this unique habitat after nearly being wiped out," he said.

"Friends of the Verde River" is preparing to update the report cards it has issued every few years that measure the health of the Verde River.

"That document will be released in spring of 2025. We also are launching project where we will be testing water quality along the river at 50 sites four times a year. We will expand that to 80 sites for water quality testing in the near future," Gressly explained. "The information we gather will be provided to policy makers so we can help them pinpoint where water quality is suffering and help them make good decisions about protecting this resource."

The keynote speaker at the conference will be former Arizona Governor and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. The conference will be held at the Cliff Castle Casino. Members of the public are invited to attend but there are registration fees, and seating is limited. Attendees are encouraged to register online.

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