

ENVIRONMENT

Conservation agreement will protect Upper Verde River, grasslands and a historic ranch

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Published 6:01 a.m. MT Dec. 2, 2024 | Updated 6:01 a.m. MT Dec. 2, 2024

PAULDEN — Standing on the edge of the Big Chino Valley, it's impossible to see the end of the grasslands that stretch for miles into the horizon. Herds of cattle and wild pronghorn antelope graze together in this remote expanse, unbroken except for the stray dirt roads crisscrossing between ranches. Below the surface, a huge groundwater resource flows into the nearby springs that feed the headwaters of the Verde River.

In this vast landscape, ranchers and conservationists are working together to guard against overdevelopment and preserve ranching in Yavapai County.

A historic conservation easement closed in the Big Chino Valley last month, marking the first step in a broad \$23 million conservation strategy seeking to preserve critical grasslands habitat and protect the aquifer feeding the Upper Verde River.

Covering 1,889 acres, the easement on the Yavapai Ranch property emerged from a partnership with the Nature Conservancy and the Natural Resources Conservation Service, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Other funding partners include the Central Arizona Land Trust, Salt River Project and Arizona Game and Fish Department.

“Conservation easements are a great tool for land use planning where we don't have other mechanisms to do so, such as zoning. And especially in the rural landscapes of Arizona,” said Heather Reading, a conservation advisor for Land Advisors Organization, who represented Yavapai Ranch in the easement negotiations. “It compensates the landowners at fair market value for the property rights that they're foregoing, so in this case, its development and the associated groundwater withdrawals.”

A conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a private landowner and a qualified organization that limits the development of private land for environmental conservation. With ongoing annual monitoring, the agreement can be tailored to meet the individual needs of the landowner while maintaining the environmental conservation goals of the participating organization.

Conservation easements have become an effective tool for conserving land in rural Arizona because they exist in perpetuity. This means that even if the property changes hands, the conservation agreement will always remain in effect and the landscape will be protected.

Without the protection, conservationists warn that the sprawling grasslands could be cut into pieces by unchecked overdevelopment, and landowners risk the possibility of state groundwater regulation.

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Protecting the Upper Verde River

In the shadow of Little Thumb Butte, the perennial springs flowing from the canyons form the headwaters of the Verde River. These winding waterways provide an oasis for wetland wildlife like the southwest river otter. Trees and grasses burst from the creek beds to support the diverse native fish below and migratory birds above.

The Big Chino Aquifer provides the majority of the baseflow for the first 25 miles of the Verde River. The nearby communities of Prescott, Prescott Valley and Chino Valley pump groundwater from an aquifer that also contributes to the river, which goes on to provide drinking water for metropolitan Phoenix farther downstream.

Conservationists and land managers are working to prevent development-driven aquifer depletion like the kind that occurred in the Kingman area of Mojave County last year. After an expansion of large-scale irrigated farming in the region threatened the aquifer, the

Arizona Department of Water Resources stopped further development and placed the region under increased regulation to prevent the collapse of the Hualapai Basin.

The Big Chino Aquifer is located outside an Active Management Area, meaning there are currently no governmental restrictions to groundwater withdrawals. Conservation easements provide an alternative to state-mandated regulation by allowing private landowners to limit groundwater withdrawals on their property.

“We recognize that in rural Arizona, we have challenges for groundwater management,” said Reading. “So the conservation easement program is very much a community-driven and locally-led solution to those challenges, and that is providing an alternative, that's a voluntary alternative.”

With limited options for conserving private land, conservation easements are the only tool being used by the Nature Conservancy and its partners to preserve the groundwater that feeds the Upper Verde River.

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Preserving the Big Chino Grasslands

Hidden within the sea of native grass, prairie dogs pop in and out of their burrows catching glimpses of a red tail hawk circling in the distance. Biodiversity abounds in the Big Chino Valley, which has been designated as a “Grasslands of Special Significance” by the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The high-quality habitat supports one of the largest herds of pronghorn antelope in Arizona, as well as nesting for western burrowing owls and a potential reintroduction site for the endangered black-footed ferret.

The valley is also a part of the Grand Canyon to Prescott Wildlife Corridor identified by the Arizona Game and Fish Department as a key migratory path for wildlife across the landscape.

“One of the reasons that we selected this habitat to protect, of course, is supporting the really important wildlife linkage,” said Jody Norris, protection program director at the Nature Conservancy, “It's important to keep the fragmentation to limited so that these species are able to to move to the grassland habitat.”

Keeping the ranch alive

The crumbling stone buildings that dot the valley are a reminder of the area's notable history, and the ranchers and farmers who work on the land are sticking to tradition in the face of evolving development across the county.

Homesteaded in 1868, the Yavapai Ranch is one of the oldest cattle ranching operations in the state, and the conservation easement is designed with that legacy in mind. The agreement ensures that the ranch can continue its current operations, while receiving a financial benefit from selling the development rights to the property.

Downstream in Camp Verde, Kevin Hauser and his family were able to pay off the mortgage on their property and reinvest into the farming operations at Hauser and Hauser Farms after partnering with the Nature Conservancy on a conservation easement.

More than a financial advantage, Claudia Hauser described the easements on the family farms as a fulfillment of her late husband's mission to “protect the land.” Kevin Hauser died in 2019, but his values as a farmer and conservationist live on with his wife and son.

“When Kevin and I were married, we leased the farmland for so long there was so much pressure from development and realtors. But now that it's our family's, I don't feel that pressure anymore,” said Claudia Hauser, “It's such a relief to be able to know that my family is going to continue to farm this land and continue that legacy of our forever farm.”

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Environmental coverage on azcentral.com and in The Arizona Republic is supported by a grant from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust.

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