



## Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River

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### Proposal Questions

#### Mission/History Of Organization

American Rivers works to make every river clean and healthy for people and wildlife. For more than a half century, we have combined hands-on expertise with enduring partnerships to safeguard drinking water, restore ecosystems that make our nation extraordinary, and ensure rivers are sources of wellbeing and prosperity — from remote mountain streams to the waterways that nourish

#### JEDI Efforts and Impact

Every person in our country depends on healthy rivers, but low-income communities, communities of color, and Tribal Nations are often disproportionately impacted by problems like sewage spills, flooding, outdated dams, and failing water infrastructure. American Rivers ensures those most impacted by water challenges have a say in solutions and that everyone

our neighborhoods. Our work focuses on three areas: clean water, resilient communities, and thriving wildlife. American Rivers has been working in the Southwest for over a decade, and established the Southwest River Protection Program in 2019.

Our Southwest River Protection Program works to protect the most ecologically and culturally important streams in the region by partnering with bipartisan decision-makers, Tribes, local communities, scientists, and NGOs to implement a suite of creative tools to reach permanent protection.

#### Final Success

Final success for the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River Campaign will be reached when 76 river miles and 24,000 acres of riverside lands of the Upper Verde River, Granite Creek, and Sycamore Creek are protected under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, and the Comprehensive River Management Plan for these rivers is completed, protecting the paddling, hiking, hunting, fishing, rock climbing, wildlife habitat, and cultural resources of the area.

#### Location Details

whose lives are connected to a river can help determine its future.

We continue to focus on hiring and retaining staff that represent the communities we work in. Practices to ensure we are recruiting, hiring and retaining people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives include a staff lead Core Values Action Group, standardized promotion processes, conducting market analysis of our pay scale and annual anonymous staff surveys, providing training from a variety of partners on how to engage with people from all backgrounds, and evaluating board recruitment to ensure our board provides a range of perspectives.

The Upper Verde River, extending from east of Paulden to the town of Clarkdale, is one of the cleanest, healthiest, most economically important, and culturally significant free-flowing rivers remaining in Arizona. The Upper Verde, along with its critical tributaries Granite Creek and Sycamore Creek, are the headwaters of the extraordinary Verde River which provides ~40% of Phoenix's surface water supply, has irreplaceable cultural significance to the Yavapai Apache Nation, and provides water for the recreational and agricultural economies of the Verde Valley. The watershed is essential habitat for 35 species of wildlife considered threatened, endangered, sensitive, or of concern.

Designating the approximately 76 river miles of the Upper Verde River (44 miles), Granite Creek (2 miles), and Sycamore Creek (30 miles) under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act would ensure that the free-flowing character, water quality, and Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) of the Upper Verde River are conserved for people and wildlife. River ORVs include Culture (54 sites), Scenery, Native Fish (10 species), Wildlife (17 species), Recreation (12 listed types, including regionally important rock climbing, paddling, and backpacking), Geology, and Botany.

Maintaining and enhancing these values is vitally important to address biodiversity loss, climate change, aridification, and ever-increasing development in the region. In addition to its intrinsic natural and cultural values, what makes the Upper Verde special is its surrounding communities' depth of care and engagement in protecting the river.

The level of community support for the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River is unique and has significantly increased since we started our campaign in 2021. Supporters include the Yavapai Apache

Nation; Arizona Governor, Katie Hobbs; Yavapai County Board of Supervisors; City of Prescott, City of Sedona, Town of Cottonwood; Town of Camp Verde; Town of Chino Valley; Town of Clarkdale; Town of Jerome; Town of Prescott Valley (i.e., all regional towns and surrounding governing bodies); 150 local businesses; Arizona State Parks and Trails; the Arizona State Historic Preservation Office; the Prescott and Coconino National Forests; and the Chambers of Commerce of Camp Verde, Chino Valley, Greater Cottonwood, Prescott Valley, and Jerome.

**Biodiversity in Project Area**

In the western United States, riparian areas comprise less than 1 percent of the land area, but they are among the most productive and valuable natural resources. 75 percent of all terrestrial species depend on riparian areas for some part of their life cycle, and 80 percent of all species including migratory birds rely on riverside lands at some stage in their lives, according to the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Designating the 76 combined river miles of the Upper Verde River, Granite Creek, and Sycamore Creek under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act would ensure that the free-flowing character, water quality, and Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Upper Verde River are conserved for people and wildlife. Maintaining and enhancing these values is vitally important to help to address biodiversity loss, climate change, aridification, and ever-increasing development in the region. The Upper Verde is one of the last and most valuable native fish habitats remaining in Arizona and, therefore, is particularly important as a climate refugia for native fish.

Once passed, the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River would connect to a number of other protected lands in the region, including the Verde Wild and Scenic River downstream, as well as the larger Prescott and Coconino National Forests, the Sycamore Canyon Wilderness Area, the Upper Verde River Wildlife Area, and the Verde River Headwaters State Park.

**Strategy & Timeline For Final Success**

The goal of the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River Coalition is to earn Wild and Scenic designation for 76 miles and 24,000 acres of riverside lands of the Upper Verde River, including 44 miles of the mainstem of the Upper Verde River, 2 miles of Granite Creek, and 30 miles of Sycamore Creek. After designation is achieved, a secondary goal is to work with partners to ensure that the Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP) is completed to a high standard.

Our strategy focuses on building broad-

**Expected Economic & Recreational Impact**

The positive economic impacts of protecting the Upper Verde River are immense. The Verde River is critical to AZ's water security, providing 40% of the surface water used by Phoenix alone. Protecting the headwaters is essential to ensuring downstream communities, agriculture, and the economies of the area continue to be able to rely on the river. In Yavapai County, 216,000 Arizona residents participate in outdoor recreation on or along waterways, creating an annual economic impact of \$1 billion and generating 9,400 jobs (AZ Audubon Report, 2019). The Verde sustains 700+ jobs and \$100+ million in economic value in the rural Verde Valley (TNC, 2011), as well as numerous other jobs upstream, downstream, and adjacent to the proposed designation.

The recognition of the importance of the Upper Verde River to the economy and way of life of the region is one of the reasons that 5 Chambers of Commerce, all surrounding local governments, the Yavapai-Apache Nation, 150 businesses, Freeport McMoRan (verbal), and the Salt River Project (verbal) support the Wild and Scenic initiative.

**Key Decision Makers**

The three decision makers we are working to influence are Representative Eli Crane (R-AZ), Senator Mark Kelly (D-AZ), and Senator Ruben Gallego (D-AZ). Our strategy has been to build robust and bipartisan support across all local levels of government and within the business community, and we've been very successful, having secured support as noted above in detail. We've interacted with both Rep. Crane and Sen. Kelly's offices in D.C. in 2023 and 2024, and at this point have consistent communication with their natural

based, non-partisan support through outreach to individuals, groups, local businesses, and corporate entities; hosting and sponsoring public and private events to build awareness and motivate action like well-attended film events, hikes in the Upper Verde River canyon, and flyovers with our partners Ecoflight; deployment of a suite of communications tools and tactics including a coalition website ([www.wildverderiver.org](http://www.wildverderiver.org)) and set of campaign assets, and engagement with all levels of decision-makers and influencers at the local, state, and federal levels. Though some members of the coalition have been working on designating the Upper Verde for decades, the reinvigorated campaign coordinated by American Rivers began in 2021 and includes over 150 business supporters, 12 local cities and counties (all the surrounding governing bodies), 5 Chambers of Commerce, 1 Tribe, and 22 conservation organizations. The Coalition first asked for introduction of a bill Spring 2024, and was received warmly by Arizona's Congressional Delegation. We want to see the bill introduced and passed in the 119th Congress, and we feel we have a bipartisan strategy to reach that goal.

Updated Timeline & Objectives:

- Campaign Restart–2021 (completed)
- Foundational Documents–2022 (completed)
- Outreach Plan: Build Public Support & Political Momentum with Priority Stakeholder Meetings and Letters of Support (2022-present)
  - oEvents and Outreach Meetings (ongoing)
  - oLogo/website (completed)
  - oOp Eds & LTEs (ongoing)
  - oHost Wild Rivers Film Tour event at Elks Theater (Completed annually 2023 and 2024, planned in 2025)
  - oHost Wild Rivers Film Tour event at the Yavapai Apache Nation (Completed 2024)
  - oHost Ecoflights (completed 2023, planned in 2025)
- Yavapai Apache Nation
- AZ Congressional delegation staff and decision-makers
- Local veterans and river restoration groups participate in Prescott National Forest (PNF) Wild and Scenic Suitability Study (completed 2023)
  - oRequired Info for Congress: Proof of Central River Values and Support (completed in March 2024 )
  - oDC Visits, including constituents, Yavapai Apache Nation, and technical support staff–2023, 2024, 2025 (planned), and beyond.
  - oMeet with members of AZ Congress to socialize idea in March 2023 (completed)
  - oMeet with members of Congress to

resources legislative staff and local/district staff. Sen. Gallego is starting his first term in 2025. We plan to visit all three delegates in D.C. in March 2025.

Our approach to these interactions uplifts alternative messengers (i.e., messengers outside of the professional conservation space), the high level of constituent support for the designation, lack of opposition, and the leadership of the Yavapai-Apache Nation in the campaign. A Prescott City Councilman and mayor candidate and the leader of the local watershed group will join us in D.C. in 2025. Yavapai-Apache Nation will also be advocating for the designation in their subsequent visit to D.C. in April 2025.

Nationwide, outdoor recreation, and the public lands and waters that it depends on, supports a \$1.4T economy – 30% more than oil, gas, and mining combined. This message is strongest when communicated by the business community. Likewise, earned media and paid media supporting designation of the Upper Verde River under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act is better heard when it comes from businesses than when it comes from the conservation community. We would welcome any help in this regard, and would like to brainstorm with you and your members, particularly those with offices or manufacturing in Arizona.

introduce draft legislation and ask for bill introduction in March 2024 (completed)

- oSubsequent meetings to work out language, introduction, and reintroduction when necessary (completed 2024, ongoing in 2025)
- oNext D.C. trip to educate the Arizona Delegation on the Upper Verde is planned for March 24, 2025

-Phase 2 of Outreach, started April 2024 and ongoing in 2025

- oPower-mapped support of influencers to AZ Delegation (completed)
- o1-on-1 meetings with potential opposition and high-value constituents including landowners, farm bureau, ranchers, industry, Salt River Project, Freeport McMoRan, etc. (ongoing)

-Verbal support achieved from Salt River Project in Summer 2024, awaiting formal letter of support

-Verbal support achieved from Freeport McMoRan in Summer 2024, awaiting formal letter of support

- oTargeted outreach to influential ranchers and agricultural producers started in Spring 2024, including shared value of limiting unregulated ATV damage to riparian corridors. Sit-down meeting on the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River proposal is planned for April 2025.
- oUpdated Media and Outreach Plan that focuses on elevating the voices of conservative supporters to the Congressional Delegation in 2025 and 2026.

-Bill Introduction in 2025, 119th Congress

- oGoal: bipartisan introduction in Congress and Senate
- oSecure hearing and markup before the end of 2026

-Bill Passage—Goal of passage in 119th Congress

- oSee example of passing East Rosebud Wild and Scenic bill (MT) in 2018
- oWill require Republican support and leadership in the House of Representatives from Representative Eli Crane (R- AZ) and support in the Senate from Senator Kelly (D-AZ) and/or Senator Gallego (D-AZ)

-Bill Reintroduction

- oIf the bill is introduced in the 119th Congress but Congress does not pass any natural resource bills, at least completing a hearing and markup will put it first in line for reintroduction in the 120th Congress

-After passage: Complete a Comprehensive River Management Plan (CRMP)

- oPrescott National Forest finalizes ORVs, boundaries, management plan w/ public participation
- oRequires EIS
- oLook to Fossil Creek CRMP as a case study

**Elevate Voices** The Yavapai Apache Nation (YAN) is a founding member and active participant in the coalition. Nancy Ruiz (previous Environmental Manager for the Nation and now Executive Assistant to the Council Chair and Vicechair) participates on the steering committee. Both Nancy Ruiz and Chairwoman Tanya Lewis went to Washington, D.C. in 2023 and 2024 with the coalition to advocate for the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic designation. They will be advocating for the designation in their individual lobbying trips to D.C. in 2025. YAN's tribal council, cultural office, and environmental office have all engaged in the development of the draft legislation.

We have reached out to the other tribes in the region, including Yavapai Prescott Indian Tribe, Fort McDowell Yavapai Nation, and Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community; we're in ongoing conversations with them as they determine to what degree they are able to engage in the coalition.

Representatives from YAN and Yavapai Prescott Indian Tribe both participated in overflights of the river with EcoFlight in the fall of '23. We hosted a Wild Rivers Film Tour at YAN in April '24.

Beyond this, in terms of grassroots support/action, we have over 600 local individuals and 150+ local businesses who have signed letters of support.

**TCA Funding Plan** Thank you for your current support at \$35,000.00, which has been critical to our efforts over the past year. We plan to use this renewal from The Conservation Alliance to support two American Rivers staff members, Mike Fiebig and Rachel Ellis. Rachel is the coordinator of the coalition, and Mike is the primary political strategist. We will also use funding for professional services including communications support, business outreach support, event planning, paid media, and the design and printing of materials and communications assets. Finally, we will use this funding for travel to accomplish campaign goals.

**Confidential Items** Our strategy and timeline above contain sensitive information about outreach to members of Congress and businesses. Please do not distribute it. Thank you!

Ok to share with members.

**Measurable On-Ground Outcomes**

Outcomes that we hope to accomplish over the next year, and can reasonably expect to succeed at include:

1. Introduction of the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River Act in either the House or the Senate in 119th Congress
2. Hearing and markup scheduled or planned in either the House Natural Resources Committee or Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee by Summer 2026.
3. Endorsement, or statement (formal or informal) of non-opposition, from key energy and utility companies in the region
4. Endorsement, or statement (formal or informal) of non-opposition, from key agricultural producers in the region (i.e., Arizona Farm Bureau)
5. Increasing the number of business supporters of the coalition by another 20 businesses

**How long it took to complete application**

**Other Relevant Application Details**