

Yavapai County Supervisors add county support to effort for Wild and Scenic status for Upper Verde River

The Upper Verde – the “little-known and under-appreciated” stretch of the river that runs from the headwaters in Paulden to the Verde Valley community of Clarkdale — got another vote of support this week for Wild and Scenic River status.

In a 4-1 vote on Wednesday, May 3, the Yavapai County Board of Supervisors agreed to send a letter of support for the federal designation of the Upper Verde River as a Wild and Scenic River.

With that vote, the county joins a number of communities in the region, including Prescott, Prescott Valley, Cottonwood, Sedona, Clarkdale and Camp Verde in support of the designation.

Supervisor Harry Oberg voted against the motion, citing concerns about how the designation might affect cattle growers in the region.

The county letter, which was included in the supervisors’ informational packet, is addressed to “whom it may concern” and states that the river in the Prescott and Coconino National Forests “is an important and unique public resource that provides numerous recreational, aesthetic and conservancy benefits to the residents of Yavapai County.”

At this week’s meeting, the board heard from Gary Beverly, chair of the Yavapai Group of the Sierra Club, about the ongoing efforts to get Wild and Scenic status for the 44.5 miles between the Verde’s headwaters and the Town of Clarkdale, as well as tributaries — for a total of 74 river miles.

While the Verde River already has a stretch of Wild and Scenic designation starting at Beasley Flat south of Camp Verde, Beverly said the Upper Verde section is also worthy of the designation.

On his first walk down the river in 2008, Beverly said, "I was just amazed by what I found on this river. The Upper Verde River, starting in Paulden, going 194 miles down to Scottsdale, is little-known and under-appreciated. It's one of the most significant resources in the southwest, and it's a top conservation priority for national and state conservation organizations."

The Wild and Scenic effort also has been gaining strong local support, Beverly said. In January 2023, he took a similar presentation to the Prescott City Council, resulting in a unanimous vote to send a letter of support for the designation from the City of Prescott.

Beverly said other communities in the region have also added their support, and he has additional presentations planned in the coming weeks before the Chino Valley Town Council and the Flagstaff City Council.

In addition, Beverly said 150 businesses throughout the Prescott, Verde Valley, and Flagstaff areas have signed letters of support, and the Prescott National Forest and the Yavapai-Apache Nation also support the effort.

"People don't say 'no' when we ask them," Beverly said. "There's tremendous support for this."

Beverly noted that the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act dates back to 1968 and is "the highest form of federal protection for rivers." He added that the designation requires approval by the U.S. Congress and the president.

"What it does is it protects free-flowing rivers that have outstandingly remarkable values," Beverly said.

To date, he said, there are 226 Wild and Scenic River segments in the U.S. and over 13,000 river miles across 41 states. "This is not an unusual thing; this is a well-tested and well-regarded way of protecting rivers and habitats," Beverly told the supervisors.

While the designation protects the free-flowing character of the river — preventing federal dams and water projects that would restrict free flow — Beverly said it would not affect the rights of private property owners along the river, such as the Perkinsville Ranch.

Still, Oberg voiced strong concerns about possible future impacts to cattle grazing along the river. He pointed out that activist groups already "don't want cattle around the river."

Maintaining that the Waters of the U.S. Act had been used to "go well beyond what the act was," Oberg said, "I'm concerned what this (the Wild and Scenic status) would do to cattle growers."

Beverly responded that the Wild and Scenic designation would bring "no new impacts to grazing," and he added, "It doesn't affect private land, so it doesn't affect Perkinsville Ranch."

Supervisor Mary Mallory asked Beverly whether he had met with cattle growers' groups, and Beverly said, "Not yet," adding that he was planning to meet with those groups after his round of meetings with local governments.

Mallory responded that she would like to hear the input from the cattle growers.

Beverly emphasized the community-management aspect of the Wild and Scenic designation. He said the act calls for a comprehensive management plan and requires community input, "so that all the other agencies and the

citizens participate in how that river is managed.”

The result, he said, is “This becomes a community river. The management plan has the effect of reflecting community values and reflecting the local features and values of the river, so it’s really an interesting piece of federal legislation, unlike many other federal acts.”

Beverly said supporters of the Upper Verde effort plan to draft legislation in the coming months to get the Wild and Scenic designation submitted into Congress.

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