



Forest Service News Release

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Upper Verde River Determined Suitable for Designation as Wild and Scenic

PRESCOTT, AZ – December 12, 2023 – The Prescott and Coconino National Forests have completed and signed the Final Decision Notice (DN) as well as associated Forest Plan amendments for establishing the suitability determination for 38 miles of the Upper Verde River for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This concludes a multi-year analysis and public process for this highly significant and valuable natural resource.

Forest Service policy affords protection to eligible wild and scenic rivers against any development that would modify free flow or adversely affect recognized outstandingly remarkable values until such time as suitability is formally determined. The goal of the policy is to protect and enhance the free-flowing character, outstandingly remarkable values, and water quality in the eligible segments.

“We recognize the sensitivity and long-lasting impact of these management decisions,” said Coconino National Forest Supervisor Aaron Mayville. “I’m confident that the public engagement and hard work done by Prescott and Coconino National Forest staff has led us to the right outcome for the long-term management of the Upper Verde River.”

The Forest Service has conducted the wild and scenic river suitability study over the last two years as the result of a proposal from the Bureau of Reclamation to construct two fish barriers to protect threatened and endangered native fish species within segments of the river that were already determined to be eligible for inclusion into the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System. Forest Service policy requires that a wild and scenic river suitability study be conducted if a proposed project has the potential to impact the river’s free-flowing condition or the outstandingly remarkable values. It has been determined that the proposed fish barriers do have the potential to impact eligibility of the river segments; hence, the Forest Service completed the suitability study.

The Final Environmental Assessment was used to inform the decision, which determines 36 of the 38.2 miles studied are suitable for future Wild and Scenic River designation by Congress. The decision works to balance the strong public support for protection of the river’s free flowing character, water quality, and numerous outstanding remarkable values (cultural, scenic, fisheries, wildlife, recreation, and botanical) with a provision for future opportunities to protect and enhance native fish habitat by finding two 1-mile segments of river as not suitable for designation.

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The two 1-mile segments are the locations proposed by Bureau of Reclamation for possible construction of fish barriers to prevent the upstream travel of non-native fish species that are one of the leading factors for decline of native fish species. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act and associated Forest Service policy would not allow the construction of the size and type of fish barriers as proposed, which is why these two segments have been found not suitable.

The decision is unique in that it includes a provision that would allow these two 1-mile-long segments to be recommended as suitable river segments if future analysis of the proposed fish barriers does not lead to construction or other factors prevent implementation. This decision and the possible future construction of fish barriers will have positive impacts on the suitable segments of river by protecting and enhancing native fish habitat for 28 miles of the suitable segments.

“This analysis and decision were challenging, and the forests greatly appreciate the members of the public, non-profit organizations, and local/state government agencies that provided input to assist in determining the future management of the Upper Verde River, one of our greatest natural resources in central Arizona” said Prescott National Forest Supervisor, Dale Deiter.

At this time the Forests’ will forward their suitability recommendation to Michiko Martin, The Regional Forester for the Southwestern Region of the Forest Service to be forwarded to Congress as a recommendation for designation as an amendment to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968.

Project files can be reviewed at: <https://www.fs.usda.gov/project/?project=61191&exp=overview>

If you have any questions about this proposal, please contact Jason Williams at 928-910-3742 or jason.a.williams@usda.gov.

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