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Former Camp Verde mayor Tony Gioia, left, meets with Arizona Senator Mark Kelly in front of the Verde River on April 25, in Clarkdale. (VVN/Tony Capobianco)

CAMP VERDE — Former Camp Verde mayor Tony Gioia is on a mission to have the Upper Verde River designated as wild and scenic.

Under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, the purpose of the designation is to ensure the water quality is maintained and requires the development of a Comprehensive River Management Plan to guide management along designated rivers for a multi-decade period. The designation will also give local land managers, land owners, and local communities additional tools and resources to enhance public access.

“A wild and scenic designation offers a number of protections to the river,” Gioia said.

“Outstandingly remarkable values” is the unit of evaluation that Congress uses to rate the value of a section of river or a home river for congressional designation. According to Gioia, the Upper Verde River checks every box necessary for designation.

The Upper Verde extends from east of Paulden to the town of Clarkdale, while the Verde River as a whole, extends down to Camp Verde. It is a recreational hub, providing locals and tourists alike with opportunities to hunt, fish, hike, swim, and paddle. The Verde Canyon Railroad, a local tourist destination in its own right, rides alongside the river as well.

It's a campaign that attracted Sen. Mark Kelly (AZ-D) to Clarkdale on April 25 to observe Doug Von Gausig, the executive director of the Verde River Institute, collect water samples from the river using a drone to test for E. coli, temperature, oxygen, and other levels. Kelly said after his town hall that he worked to give the Verde River a scenic designation, which as he said, "will help a little bit in protecting the Verde River."

Gioia said his meeting with the senator was "most definitely productive."

"We've had a number of meetings with his staff, and we really want this to be introduced as bipartisan," Gioia said. "It won't go anywhere unless both sides of the aisle are behind it. So we want to ensure that happens."

Gioia said he has also had contact with Rep. Eli Crane's staff and has made an effort to emphasize that four rivers garnered the wild and scenic rivers designation during Donald Trump's first term as President of the United States.

The Verde Independent attempted to contact Crane's communication staff for comment and did not receive a response by the time of publication.

"There are things that he wants to make sure that it doesn't work out against him for supporting this," Gioia said.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Forest Service sent letters to Crane, Kelly, and outgoing Sen. Kyrsten Sinema on Dec. 23, 2024, recommending four rivers, including the Upper Verde, be given the wild and scenic river designation.

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs wrote a letter on Dec. 27, 2023, supporting "keeping the Upper Verde River free-flowing for families to recreate, for wildlife, and for the vitality of Arizona's economy." In her letter, she describes the Verde as Arizona's longest surviving, living river, as well as one that supports 21 species listed under the Endangered Species Act and a river that creates an annual \$1 billion economic impact according to the Arizona Audubon Report and the 2019 Yavapai County Fact Sheet.

Every town in Yavapai County voiced their support. While the letters were sent in 2023, Prescott sent its letter of support on Jan. 10, 2025, noting that the designation “is crucial for the preservation of one of Arizona’s last surviving perennial rivers, a resource that holds immense ecological, cultural, and recreational value for our community and the entire Verde Valley region.”

“Locally, we have an unbelievable amount of backing. Every city and town in the vicinity, all of the Verde Valley councils, mayors, have voted to support it,” Gioia said. “Even that’s astounding to me that they are also supporting this. It’s just a different world than it was 10 years ago.”

Contact Tony Capobianco at tcapobianco@verdenews.com