

Could Upper Verde River earn Arizona's highest water protection? ADEQ explains process

By Stan Bindell

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The Arizona Department of Environmental Quality held an informational meeting about whether the Upper Verde River should be granted Outstanding Arizona Water (OAW) status.

About 25 people gathered Wednesday, Nov. 19, at the Paulden Community Building on a rainy cold evening to hear about the process and how the status could help this section of the river.

Katie Anderson, ADEQ project manager, spoke about the river. Meghan Smart, ADEQ principal scientist for the community science and education program, spoke about ADEQs Community Science Alliance program.

Then ADEQ held an open house with those attending able to see booths about the project and ADEQ staff was on hand to answer questions, but this was only an informational meeting as ADEQ did not take comments from the public.

The designation is given to high quality water that have:

- Exceptional recreational significance;
- Exceptional ecological significance; and,
- Support threatened or endangered species.

The designation comes through state rule making and existing water quality must be maintained with the exception of some temporary impacts.

ADEQ, Arizona Community Science Alliance and other organizations gather data from the water to see if the nomination should be approved.

Sycamore Creek is also being considered for OAW. Both meet the criteria of waterways that are at least intermittent.

The waterways must have good water quality and free flowing. The recreation currently available for the Upper Verde River includes hiking, Verde Canyon Railroad and Forest Service road access.

The Upper Verde River has critical habitat for five threatened or endangered species – Loach Minnow, Spinedace, Narrow headed garter snake, yellow billed cuckoo, and Razorback Sucker.

The majority of the land along the Upper Verde is public Prescott National Forest land and the proposal aligns with existing land management.

There is no direct cost impact by this designation.

ADEQ will also consider public support or opposition.

The impacts of an OAW is a higher level of water quality; prohibits new or increased discharges; and ADEQ will work collaboratively with land owners, land managers and stakeholders to assure a high quality of water.

The designated area will also receive a high priority for improvement of water quality. Some grants may be available for those that qualify.

ADEQ will be taking public comments in the spring of 2026, the process will continue through the summer and, if approved, it would become effective in the fall of 2026.

For more information contact waterqualitystandards@azdeq.gov.

Behind the scenes

Smart created the Arizona Community Science Alliance in 2017, which is the first community science program in the nation to be part of a regulatory agency. This science foundation collects data on air, water and land.

Smart said the ACSA collects data, removes trash, holds events, and offers volunteer opportunities. They also have curriculum for teachers to use. They can provide equipment, networking and air and water quality monitoring.

Smart praised the Sierra Club for helping to monitor water levels at the Upper Verde River.

Smart, who has her bachelor's in natural resources from the University of Arizona, said she loves Arizona for its natural beauty including that it's the hummingbird capital of the world in southern Arizona, and has the largest stand of ponderosa pine in the world in Northern Arizona. She said this is why ADEQ's mission of protecting air, water and land is so important.

Anderson, who earned her degree at Minnesota State University, said the OAW designation would not allow the discharge of wastewater into the Upper Verde. It would also keep an eye on discharges coming from farms.

Anderson said the solutions can sometimes be simple. For example, if the problem is coming from cattle manure then the rancher would have to clean it up.

If E. coli was found in the water, ADEQ would seek out the source and address the problem. She said Prescott National Forest, Arizona Game and Fish, and landowners could work collaboratively to solve any problems.

The section considered for OAW starts four miles downstream from Paulden and goes 35 miles until the river goes into Clarkdale where it hits the confluence of Sycamore Creek.

Anderson said the Upper Verde River is gorgeous: "It is one of the last free flowing waters in Arizona."

Anderson points out that this is not to be confused with the proposed federal designation of the Upper Verde River Wild and Scenic designation, which must be approved by Congress.

"We want people to come out and see the Upper Verde River," she said.

Short said if people come to the Upper Verde River they will see its beauty and want to protect it.

"I've been there so many times I can't count. The river is so full of life for wildlife and it gives humans recreation," she said.

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