

Guest column: Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River

By GARY BEVERLY, Special to the Courier Nov 4, 2025

Saturday, a cool windy fall day, finds eight of us hiking the upper Verde. Now is the golden season — the green season begins in May — and both are beautiful. As bald eagles circle, a red-tailed hawk cries and flees and native fish flash for cover. On a quiet terrace overlooking the river, we discover a rock art panel and an ancient campsite where indigenous people lived in harmony with the seasonal rhythms.

The Verde River is a truly exceptional ecological resource for the Southwest and the entire country, especially for our local area. The Verde River watershed is 6% of the land area in Arizona, yet it supports three-quarters of Arizona's vertebrate species.

Flooding is a natural rhythm on the Verde, scouring the riverbed an essential event in the riverine ecology that helps the native fishery. But perennial flow is absolutely crucial to the aquatic habitat. The foundation of perennial flow is baseflow, consisting of groundwater from the Big Chino (86%) and Little Chino (14%) aquifers emerging at Verde Springs.

As a result of climate change and groundwater pumping, baseflow has declined every year since 1996. Now only half of the predevelopment flow remains, threatening the very existence of the river. No water, no river!

Although the Verde is severely threatened, recent efforts might save our river. In the upper Big Chino Valley, conservation easements prevent increased groundwater pumping, and thousands of acres of private land have been purchased for transfer to Prescott National Forest. We have a new state park at the historic headwaters, Del Rio Springs. Prescott and Prescott Valley have promised to mitigate their proposed pumping from the Big Chino aquifer, but they have not yet revealed how that will be accomplished.

A team of national and local conservation groups is proposing federal designation of the Upper Verde Wild and Scenic River (UVWSR). This will protect 75 miles of the upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek, nearly all now publicly owned.

The UVWSR team has gathered massive support from every city in the Verde Valley and west Yavapai County, the Board of Supervisors, chambers of commerce, hundreds of small businesses, Gov. Katie Hobbs, former Gov. Bruce Babbitt, Prescott National Forest, and the Yavapai Apache Nation. Senators Mark Kelly and Ruben Gallego are strongly supportive. We are now negotiating with Rep. Eli Crane — the final step to introducing our bill into Congress.

Designating the UVWSR will prevent dams and maintain water quality. Federal law requires creating a customized management plan. Public participation is required, assuring that the plan reflects community values. The plan must maintain or improve six outstandingly remarkable

values: scenery, native fish, wildlife, geology, recreation and cultural sites. Essentially, the plan ensures that federal authorities will manage the river consistent with community values. At a minimum, the plan will maintain the river in its current condition.

What does UVWSR not do? It does not expropriate private land. It does not interfere with private property owners' rights to access and use their property. Grazing permits remain administered by Prescott National Forest, and are not changed. Farming is unaffected. Hunting, fishing, and other recreational uses continue with improved access. It does not affect existing water rights. And, it does not guarantee river flow.

The federal government cannot fully protect this river. Preserving the Verde River also needs state and local action. That's up to state and local officials — and to voters — that's us!

To learn more about the UVWSR proposal, visit wildverderiver.org and add your name to our support network.

The Citizens Water Advocacy Group invites you to attend the program "Upper Verde River: Value, Threats, Protection" on Saturday, Nov. 8. Details under "Next Event" at www.cwagaz.org.

Gary Beverly, Ph.D is a member of the CWAG Executive Committee and a retired business owner working to protect the Verde River.