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A win: Upper Verde River gains landmark protection; Wild and Scenic designation is next

By STAN BINDELL, For the Review
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Russ Pilcher with the Sierra Club's Water Sentinels measures the flow of the Upper Verde River on June 15, 2025. (Stan Bin Review, file)



Prescott-area environmentalists were thrilled when the Arizona Governor's Regulatory Review Council (GRRRC) on Sept. 2 approved the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality's (ADEQ) proposal to grant Outstanding Arizona Waters (OAW) status to the Upper Verde River and portions of Sycamore Creek.

The landmark decision moves Arizona's highest level of surface water protection to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) for final federal review.

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs stated in a news release that protecting the state's water future requires bold action to safeguard the state's most clean and ecologically vital rivers.

"This historic designation reflects our unwavering commitment to preserving the Verde River watershed for local communities, wildlife and generations of Arizonans to come," she said.

Gary Beverly, chairman of the Sierra Club's Yavapai Group, said this was a huge victory giving the Upper Verde River another layer of protection. He said the Sierra Club has been working on this since 2012 and he has been working on it since 2017.

Joe Trudeau, a Prescott environmentalist and a member of the Wild Verde River Coalition, credits the Sierra Club and ADEQ with doing the work to achieve the Outstanding Area Water status.

"It's fantastic that we achieved that status and it's something we should all celebrate because the Verde River is a valued resource that is under pressure due to groundwater pumping, pollution and fire," he said.

Sandy Bahr, state director for the Sierra Club, also celebrated the achievement of Outstanding Arizona Water status.

"A big shout out to our Water Sentinels and Steve Pawlowski who got the proposal started, and Jennifer Martin and the team who helped fill in the blanks on the data that ADEQ requested, and to everyone who works every day for the rivers, lands, water, wildlife and more. This is good news for the river and hopefully a Wild and Scenic designation is next," she said.

The Water Sentinels is a branch of the Sierra Club that continually measures the water flow of the Verde River.

Beverly, a Chino Valley resident, said in the early years their attempt for OAW status ran into unfriendly state administrations. However, he said the Hobbs administration showed its concern for protecting the Upper Verde River.

He also praised Megan Smart, citizen science coordinator with ADEQ, for doing the work needed to get the designation.

The water testing to get this designation was comprehensive, Beverly said, as they regularly tested the water in five locations. These locations were on the Upper Verde River between Paulden and Sycamore Creek. They were testing for a dozen different chemicals.

"The Verde passed with flying colors," he said.

Beverly said that initially the tests could not be done because Arizona Game and Fish planned to put up fish barriers, but those barriers were never set up.

After ADEQ determined that all the requirements were met, it sent the proposal to the GRRC.

Beverly said the designation as an Outstanding Arizona Water status means that degradation of the river will not be allowed from the point of source.

He said this means that mining companies, or other companies "are not allowed to put crap in the river. ... It shows that the Upper Verde River is an incredible resource. It is one more step toward protecting the river."

Beverly said no one designation will totally protect the river, but every layer helps.

He said the next step is obtaining federal Wild and Scenic River designation, which must be approved by Congress and has not happened yet. Beverly has been working to get this designation since 2008.

"This is especially important since the Verde River is the last perennial running river in Arizona, since we have used up the Colorado River, the San Pedro River and other rivers," he said. "Getting the Outstanding Arizona Water status took persistence and getting the Wild and Scenic River status will also take persistence."

Beverly said the Verde River is important to protect because of the varied wildlife, recreation, and the more than 100 cultural sites along the river.

The Wild and Scenic designation proposal has bipartisan support and support from every community in Yavapai County, he said.

Next steps

Following GRRC approval, ADEQ will complete the remaining rule-making steps before submitting the water quality standards update to the EPA for final federal review.

Once fully approved, the designation grants Tier 3 anti-degradation protection to 35.93 miles of the Upper Verde River — from the Granite Creek confluence downstream to Sycamore Creek — and 11.71 miles of Sycamore Creek from Cedar Creek to its confluence with the Verde River.

Tier 3 status legally prohibits degradation of existing water quality, preserving vital wildlife habitats, threatened species and regional recreational resources.

"This approval represents a major victory for science-based water stewardship," ADEQ Director Karen Peters said. "By establishing Tier 3 protections for these critical stretches of the Upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek, we are ensuring that these pristine waters remain clean, healthy, and resilient."

Originally nominated in November 2023 by the Sierra Club Grand Canyon Chapter, the proposal has undergone extensive technical evaluation and public review before reaching GRRC approval.



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