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PRESS RELEASE

Arizona Approves Highest State Water Quality Protection for Upper Verde River

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Governor’s Regulatory Review Council approves Outstanding Arizona Waters designation for nearly 48 miles of critical waterways, sending rule to EPA for final clearance.

PHOENIX (Sept. 2, 2026) — The Governor’s Regulatory Review Council (GRRC) has 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.

“Protecting Arizona's water future requires bold action to safeguard our most clean and ecologically vital rivers,” said Governor Katie Hobbs. “This historic designation reflects our unwavering commitment to preserving the Verde River watershed for local communities, wildlife, and generations of Arizonans to come.”

Following GRRC approval, ADEQ will complete the remaining rulemaking steps before submitting the water quality standards update to EPA for final federal review. Once fully approved, the designation grants Tier 3 antidegradation 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,” said ADEQ Director Karen Peters. “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 underwent extensive technical evaluation and public review before reaching GRRRC approval.

Arizona currently has 22 designated OAWs. If approved by EPA, the Upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek designations would bring the statewide total to 24. For proposed designations and related rulemaking documents | [View Rulemaking Page >](#)

About Outstanding Arizona Waters

An Outstanding Arizona Water is a regulatory designation granted to free-flowing rivers and streams with exceptional ecological, cultural, or recreational significance. Under state and federal Clean Water Act regulations, Tier 3 protection prevents future water quality degradation from new or expanded point-source discharges. For detailed program criteria | [See Program >](#)

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