



August 12, 2022

Michiko Martin
Regional Forester
US Forest Service Southwestern Region
333 Broadway SE
Albuquerque, NM 87102

Via email - michiko.martin@usda.gov

**Re: Support for the Upper Verde River Watershed-Yavapai Ranch (Phase II)
Land & Water Conservation Fund request by Prescott National Forest**

Dear Regional Forester Martin:

Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation (AZSFWC) is a 501c-3 non-profit organization dedicated to wildlife conservation, habitat work, youth recruitment and retention, as well as educating outdoor enthusiasts on issues important to their passions. AZSFWC member organizations reach across the spectrum of wildlife conservation, hunting, angling, shooting sports, outdoor recreation groups and businesses from across Arizona, representing more than 25,000 people.

AZSFWC is a signatory of the Upper Verde Fact Sheet and supports responsible management and conservation of the Verde River and its watershed. AZSFWC has also been a longtime advocate and supporter of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), for purposes and projects just like this one proposed by the Prescott National Forest (Forest).

AZSFWC strongly supports the Fiscal Year 2024 LWCF request for the Upper Verde River Watershed – Yavapai Ranch Phase II (Phase II) submitted by the Forest to acquire approximately 7,300 acres of the historic Yavapai Ranch (Ranch) in Yavapai County, Arizona. The 52,000-acre Ranch comprises the largest remaining private in-holding in the Southwestern Region of the US Forest Service (USFS).

We are grateful that the USFS included \$9.5 million in its FY 2023 budget for a Phase I acquisition of 3,773 acres of the Ranch and ranked the project #9 nationally. The family that owns the Ranch is now willing to sell 41,000 acres to consolidate land in USFS ownership. AZSFWC requests your continued commitment to this outstanding multi-phase conservation and recreation project in FY 2024 and beyond.

This Phase II LWCF acquisition will secure another eleven and one-half 640-acre sections within the checkerboard of privately-owned and National Forest System lands located 40 miles from the growing communities of Prescott, Prescott Valley, and Chino Valley.

AZSFWC Support for Upper Verde Watershed-Yavapai Ranch LWCF Request by Prescott NF – 8-12-22

Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation
PO Box 75731 New River, AZ 85087

Investments in this project from LWCF, NRCS, and the Yavapai Apache Nation will further consolidate ownership and protect resource values in the Verde River watershed. Together, these multi-agency efforts will secure permanent protection for the eastern third of the Ranch.

This proposed Phase II LWCF acquisition will result in the following conservation benefits:

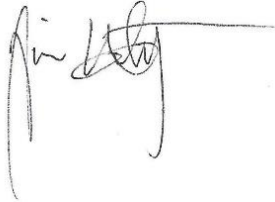
1. Enhanced recreational access and consolidated resource protection. If acquired by the Forest in its entirety, acquisition of the Ranch would resolve management and access issues by consolidating over 92,000 acres of permanently conserved land in the Upper Verde River Watershed. The Ranch provides important access points to Juniper Mesa Wilderness and thousands of acres of adjacent forest, woodlands, and grasslands that are treasured by outdoor recreation enthusiasts and hunters. These private lands are currently open to the public, but if sold for development that access could be lost forever. This acquisition will secure permanent public access and enhance efforts by the Forest to expand recreational opportunities.
2. Protection of the Upper Verde River and state water supplies. Flows from the 190-mile Verde River are a lifeblood for Arizona. Both headwaters and downstream communities of the Verde Valley depend on the river for irrigated agriculture, native fish and wildlife habitat, and river recreation that drives tourism and economic prosperity. Farther downstream, the river provides a critical source of drinking water for nearly 5 million people in metropolitan Phoenix. The river is both sacred and essential to multiple Native American Tribes with reservations and ancestral lands in the watershed. Explosive growth in Yavapai County is creating increasing development pressure and threatening water quantity and quality. As Colorado River water flows are depleted and Arizona's share of water from that source is reduced, protecting Verde River water supplies has become even more critical to Arizona's water security. The Phase II acquisition builds upon successful multi-partner efforts and federal investments in Verde River conservation.
3. Protection of important linkages within the Resilient and Connected Network of Lands in North America. The Resilient and Connected Network (RCN) includes lands that are resilient to changes in the climate and provide a pathway for species to migrate, as necessary. The Phase II LWCF acquisition includes multiple habitat types within the RCN, along with critically important wildlife migration corridors that are within the Grand Canyon to Prescott Corridor Complex. These are identified in the Arizona Game and Fish Department's State Wildlife Action Plan Update 2020 as critical for all wildlife.
4. Contribution to wildfire risk mitigation efforts. The Phase II acquisition and consolidation of forest ownership will help the Forest complete existing and approved high priority forest treatments that are crucial to maintaining the health and environmental quality of the Verde River. Consolidated ownership will not only increase treatment effectiveness but also reduce management costs due to a more consolidated landownership pattern.

AZSFWC and 28 of our member organizations (list attached) consider conserving the Verde River watershed, protecting resilient wildlife movement and migration corridors, and enhancing public access for multiple recreational uses as some of our top priorities. The proposed Phase II acquisition would provide an important contribution towards those conservation objectives and outcomes!

Thank you for considering this Phase II acquisition request from the Forest for an additional allocation from the LWCF in FY 2024.

Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions about our support.

Yours in Conservation,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jim Unmacht", with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Jim Unmacht
Executive Director

executivedirector@azsfwc.org

cc:

Dale Deiter, Forest Supervisor, Prescott National Forest

dale.deiter@usda.gov

Tracy Parker, Director of Lands and Minerals, USFS Southwestern Region

Tracy.Parker@usda.gov

Brenda Schick, Singing Stream Conservation Consulting

brenda@singingstreamconservation.com



**AZSFWC Member Organizations Supporting the
Upper Verde Watershed-Yavapai Ranch (Phase II)
LWCF Request by the Prescott National Forest**

Anglers United
AZ Antelope Foundation
AZ Bass Nation
AZ Big Game Super Raffle
AZ Chapter of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers
AZ Chapter National Wild Turkey Federation
AZ Chapter of Safari Club International
AZ Council of Trout Unlimited
AZ Deer Association
AZ Desert Bighorn Sheep Society
AZ Elk Society
AZ Flycasters Club
AZ Houndsmen's Association
AZ Outdoor Adventures
AZ Outdoor Sports
Ben Avery Clay Busters
Christian Hunters of America
Mohave Sportsman Club
Mule Deer Foundation
Outdoor Experience 4 All
South Eastern AZ Sportsmen Club
Southern AZ Quail Forever
Southwest Wildlife Foundation
Valley of the Sun Quail Forever
SRT Outdoors
The Bass Federation of AZ
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Yuma Valley Rod & Gun Club

AZSFWC Support for Upper Verde Watershed-Yavapai Ranch LWCF Request by Prescott NF – 8-12-22

Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation
PO Box 75731 New River, AZ 85087