



August 14, 2024

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Transmitted via email - Michiko.Martin@usda.gov

Re: Support for the Upper Verde River Watershed – Yavapai Ranch (Phase IV) Land and Water Conservation Fund request by Prescott National Forest

Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation (AZSFWC) is the leading 501c-3 non-profit organization in Arizona dedicated to wildlife conservation, habitat improvement, youth recruitment and retention, as well as providing educational opportunities for outdoor enthusiasts on issues important to their passions. AZSFWC's member, affiliate, and associate groups reach across the spectrum of conservation, angling, hunting, shooting, outdoor recreation, and businesses from across Arizona. Our member groups alone represent over 28,500 people from Arizona.

AZSFWC has been an enthusiastic supporter of the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) for many years. We have also advocated and supported the Prescott National Forest's (PNF) efforts in working with the Yavapai Ranch (Ranch) to transfer Ranch holdings to the PNF for the benefit of wildlife, recreation, watershed, and management; effectively eliminating a significant amount of the public-private checkerboard that has existed for decades in Yavapai County, Arizona.

AZSFWC and 32 of our organizations (list attached) strongly support the Fiscal Year 2026 LWCF request for the Upper Verde River Watershed – Yavapai Ranch Phase IV acquisition submitted by the PNF. The Ranch comprises the largest private in-holding in the Southwestern Region of the US Forest Service (Forest).

AZSFWC appreciates that the Forest has initiated the first Phases of the Ranch acquisition and has prioritized Phase III of the project by moving it up to #4 in national ranking and including it in the FY 2025 budget. We request your continued commitment to this outstanding multi-phase conservation and recreation project in the budget for FY 2026.

This Phase IV LWCF acquisition will secure another 6 sections of land within the checkerboard of Ranch and PNF lands. The PNF previously submitted 5 of these 6 sections for LWCF funding in FY 2024 and they were ranked #5 nationally on the FY 2024 USFS Supplemental project list. However, the Forest did not receive the anticipated

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Arizona Sportsmen for Wildlife Conservation
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Supplemental Project funding for those additional LWCF acquisition projects in the 2024 budget.

This Phase IV request thus restores the project's original momentum, and with the addition of one new section, enables full acquisition of the entire eastern third of the Ranch by PNF. This furthers the goal of landscape-scale resource protection and consolidates some of the fractured land ownership in the PNF.

The Ranch is located 40 miles from the rapidly growing communities of Prescott, Prescott Valley, and Chino Valley. The greatest threat to the water, wildlife, and recreation values of the Ranch – exacerbated by the checkerboard pattern of land ownership - are private development and catastrophic wildfire. If the Ranch were to be developed rather than conserved, the resulting fragmentation would significantly diminish recreational access for the public and complicate efforts by PNF to mitigate and manage the risk of catastrophic wildfire for the protection of both natural and cultural resources.

The new section added to the Phase IV LWCF request is especially at risk of development because it is bisected by Williamson Valley Road. The protection of this section not only eliminates the risk of development but also looks to significantly enhance public access and recreation opportunities in this area of the PNF.

For over 40 years the Ranch owners and PNF have been working to consolidate the checkerboard land ownership. There is an immediate opportunity for the Forest to do just that, acquire 41,000 acres of the Ranch, and achieve the mutual goal of both parties. The Ranch's principal owner has a desire to complete this very important project with the Forest while he still has the controlling interest in the property.

If the PNF was able to acquire the Ranch in its entirety, the project would resolve management and access issues by consolidating over 92,000 acres of permanently conserved land in the Upper Verde River and Bill Williams River watersheds, and ultimately also serve to protect the lower Colorado River basin. Investments in this project from LWCF, Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), and the Yavapai-Apache Nation will further consolidate fragmented ownership and protect multiple natural and cultural resource values.

Upon completion, the Upper Verde River – Yavapai Ranch LWCF project will:

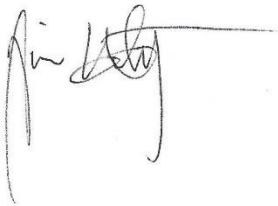
1. Enhance recreational access and consolidate resource protection for more than 92,000 acres.
2. Contribute to protecting Big Chino Aquifer, the Upper Verde River, and state water supplies.
3. Contribute to ongoing downstream conservation efforts on the Verde River.
4. Protect the upper watershed of the Bill Williams River, an important tributary to the Colorado River that supports native fish, wildlife, and the largest native woodlands on the lower Colorado River.
5. Protect critically important habitat within the Resilient and Connected Network of Lands in North America for one of the largest remaining herds of pronghorn antelope as well as elk, mule deer, grassland dependent birds and wildlife, and numerous other native terrestrial species.
6. Resolve a highly fragmented landownership pattern and acquire the largest remaining inholding in the Forest's Southwestern Region which directly aligns with

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the nation's Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) emphasis. The PNF has been identified as one of the nation's top priority WCS landscapes, and acquisition of the Ranch will only help to further reduce wildfire risk to resources and enhance mitigation efforts through landownership consolidation and greatly increase the effectiveness of landscape scale restoration activities.

AZSFWC believes all these conservation efforts are of critical importance as Arizona's population continues to grow and brings more development to the state. The proposed Upper Verde River Watershed – Yavapai Ranch Phase IV project provides an important contribution towards those conservation outcomes.

Thank you for considering the request from PNF for an additional allocation from the LWCF in FY 2026 for Phase IV of this important acquisition!



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**AZSFWC Organizations Supporting the
Upper Verde Watershed-Yavapai Ranch (Phase IV) LWCF
Request from the Prescott National Forest**

Anglers United
AZ Antelope Foundation
AZ Bass Nation
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 Mule Deer Organization
AZ Outdoor Adventures
AZ Outdoor Sports
AZ Predator Callers
Conservation First USA
Conserve and Protect AZ
Friends of Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge
Into the Wild Outdoors
Mogollon Sporting Association
Mule Deer Foundation
No Excuse Hunting and Outdoors
Outdoor Experience 4 All
Southern AZ Quail Forever
Southwest Wildlife Foundation
Valley of the Sun Quail Forever
SRT Outdoors
Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership
Wildlife for Tomorrow
Wildlife Water Works
Yuma Valley Rod & Gun Club

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