



August 11, 2023

Michiko Martin, Regional Forester
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Via email: michiko.martin@usda.gov

Re: Support for the Upper Verde River Watershed-Yavapai Ranch (Phase III) Land & 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 consists of 39 member, affiliate, and associate groups that reach across the spectrum of conservation, hunting, angling, 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 the public-private checkerboard that has existed for decades in Yavapai County, Arizona.

AZSFWC strongly supports the Fiscal Year 2025 LWCF request for the Upper Verde River Watershed – Yavapai Ranch Phase III project submitted by the PNF to acquire land within the historic Ranch. The Ranch property currently comprises the largest private in-holding in the Southwestern Region of the US Forest Service (Forest).

AZSFWC appreciates the Forest has initiated the important Phase I of the Ranch acquisition and has prioritized Phase II of the project by moving it up to #6 in national ranking and including it in the FY 2024 budget. We request your continued commitment to this outstanding multi-phase conservation and recreation project for the FY 2025 budget.

This Phase III LWCF acquisition would secure another 7 sections, roughly at 640-acres per section within the checkerboard of Ranch and PNF lands 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.

For over 40 years the Ranch owners and PNF have been working to consolidate the checkerboard land ownership. There is now 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.

AZSFWC Support for the Yavapai Ranch Phase III LWCF Grant Request – 8-11-23

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

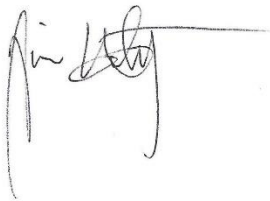
If the PNF was able to acquire the Ranch in its entirety, the project would resolve management and access issues by consolidating over 92,000 acres of permanently conserved land in the Upper Verde River and Bill Williams River watersheds, and ultimately also serve to protect the lower Colorado River 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 Land and Water Conservation Fund 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 pronghorn antelope, elk, mule deer, grassland dependent birds and wildlife, and numerous other native species.
6. Resolve fragmented ownership and acquire the largest remaining inholding in the Forest's Southwestern Region in order to align with the nation's Wildfire Crisis Strategy (WCS) emphasis. The PNF has been identified as one of the nation's top priority landscapes, and acquisition of the Ranch will only help to further reduce wildfire risk mitigation efforts through ownership consolidation and increased forest treatment effectiveness.

AZSFWC believes all these conservation efforts are of critical importance as Arizona's population continues to grow bringing more development to the state. The proposed Upper Verde River Watershed – Yavapai Ranch Phase III 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 2025 for Phase III of this important acquisition!



Jim Unmacht
Executive Director

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