

Commentary: Only collaboration will keep Verde River flowing

verdenews.com/news/2017/nov/04/commentary-only-collaboration-will-keep-verde-rive/

By CHIP NORTON and BRENT BITZ Special to Verde Valley Newspapers, Inc.



The Verde River is one of the last remaining healthy, perennially flowing rivers left in the arid state of Arizona. The Verde River system, including its connected streams, creeks, and groundwater resources, supports the economies of rural communities and businesses both as a vital water supply and as a driver of tourism and recreation. There are long-term threats, however, to the health of the Verde River.

The Verde River's historical flows have been reduced by a combination of surface water diversions to support agriculture, groundwater pumping in growing communities along the river, and prolonged drought resulting from a changing climate.

The river's future flows are threatened by the expansion of groundwater pumping to meet new development needs, further reductions in natural flows due to climate change and severe drought conditions, and continued uses under current water management practices and policies.

Verde River watershed riverside lands are increasingly threatened by invasive, non-native trees and shrubs, including Russian olive, tree of heaven, and giant reed.

These non-natives may increase wildfire hazard, displace native vegetation and wildlife, and alter stream function.

Additionally, many of these same riparian areas are experiencing accelerated streambank erosion resulting in degraded water quality and loss of arable lands.

For the past decade, Friends of Verde River Greenway has been an active community-based organization dedicated to preserving both the Verde River and the water resources that support it. Earlier this year, Friends merged with the Verde River Basin Partnership and the Verde River Valley Nature Organization and has renamed itself Friends of the Verde River in recognition of the widening scope of programs and activities.

Since 2011, Friends has acted as the lead entity in the Verde Watershed Restoration Coalition. In partnership with over 240 private landowners, public land managers, tribes, and others, we have mapped and removed invasive species, performed streambank stabilization, and provided technical assistance and education to owners of riparian land.

Friends currently leads two programs that focus on sustaining Verde River flows. The Verde River Exchange provides a market-driven vehicle for current and potential water users to balance the impacts of groundwater use on the Verde River.

The program is aimed at protecting Verde River flows while promoting sustainable economic development. The Verde Land and Water Planning Toolbox is an online resource featuring local land use planning tools and water management strategies.

The Toolbox brings peer learning and experience to local planners and water managers for reducing water consumption, improving development patterns, and instituting water conservation measures.

Friends believes that only collaborative community efforts will preserve our water resources and the Verde River. As such, we emphasize the promotion of community stewardship through partnerships, conferences, educational presentations, and events. Let's work together so that future generations have the same quality of life and economic opportunities that we all currently enjoy.

Chip Norton is president of Friends of the Verde River. Brent Bitz is a Friends of the River board member and a CWAG member. Norton and Bitz discuss "Friends of the Verde River – Vision for The Future" when they speak to Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG) Saturday, Nov. 11. Details at www.cwagaz.org.