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SAN PEDRO RIVER

THREAT: Unregulated groundwater pumping, poorly planned development

STATE:

Arizona

AT RISK:

Endangered species, riparian ecosystems, migratory birds

SUMMARY

Arizona's San Pedro River supports one of the most biodiverse ecosystems in North America and is one of the last, major free-flowing rivers in the desert Southwest. However, excessive groundwater pumping is causing stretches of the San Pedro to dry up— a problem exacerbated by poorly planned development that withdraws too much of the river's limited water. Additionally, rollbacks to the Clean Water Act initiated during the Trump administration have removed protections for seasonal and intermittent streams, which encompass almost 94 percent of the San Pedro River's waterways and provide the lifeblood that sustains the river. In order to protect the San Pedro, the Arizona legislators must pass laws to protect groundwater supplies and the Biden administration must strengthen Clean Water Act protections.

SAN PEDRO RIVER, ARIZONA

PHOTO: STEVE SPRAGER

THE RIVER

Originating in Sonora, Mexico, and flowing north through southeast Arizona, the San Pedro River supports a lush ribbon of cottonwood-willow galleries that provide significant habitat for millions of birds each year, including nearly half of the 900 species of migratory birds in North America. The San Pedro is also home to many endangered and threatened species, such as the jaguar, ocelot, southwestern willow flycatcher, western yellow-billed cuckoo, lesser long-nosed bat and the rare Huachuca water umbel plant. Recognizing the importance of the San Pedro, Congress protected 40 miles of the upper San Pedro River as a National Conservation Area in 1988.

Humans have depended on the San Pedro River for at least 10,000 years— the Clovis people at one time hunted for mammoths in the surrounding valley. Other Indigenous peoples who have depended on the San Pedro include the Cochise, the Hohokam and the Sobaipuri, who were largely driven out of the valley by Spanish colonists. Today, the river supports local communities by offering extensive recreational opportunities, including internationally-renowned bird-watching opportunities.

An expansive network of seasonal and intermittent streams supply the San Pedro with huge volumes of water from the mountains during storm events and are essential to the functioning of the river in this arid region. These types of small, headwater streams recharge the underground aquifer, providing almost 50 percent of the San Pedro River's baseflow during drier times of the year. In addition, wetlands associated with the river help to stabilize the water supply, lessening the extreme effects of flood, drought and fire, and maintaining and improving water quality by removing sediment, nutrients and pollutants from surface water— all essential functions to maintain a healthy ecosystem.

THE THREAT

Groundwater pumping poses a massive threat to the longevity and health of the San Pedro River. The base flow of the river is sustained by groundwater from the regional aquifer, which keeps the river flowing during the long dry seasons. However, groundwater levels across much of the river's sub-watershed are declining due to ever-increasing human and agricultural uses.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

SINJIN EBERLE
American Rivers
(720) 373-0864
seberle@americanrivers.org

JULIAN GONZALEZ
Earthjustice
(646) 316-5035
jgonzalez@earthjustice.org

TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/
SanPedroRiver2022](https://AmericanRivers.org/SanPedroRiver2022)

SAN PEDRO RIVER, ARIZONA

PHOTO: BOB WICK, BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Stretches of river that previously flowed year-round are drying up. To complicate matters further, Arizona's water laws fail to recognize the connection between groundwater and surface water. While diversions from surface waters are approved based on historical use rights, the state allows for unlimited groundwater pumping in most places including the San Pedro River, leaving groundwater largely unregulated at the state level. Across Arizona—where more than 40 percent of the water supply comes from groundwater—residents and businesses are drilling wells deeper to reach water as they continue to dry up and the water table continues to sink. The threat to the river and water supplies will only grow with climate change, as the Southwest becomes hotter and drier.

The proposed Villages at Vigneto

development in Benson, Arizona, exemplifies the groundwater threat to the San Pedro River. This residential and commercial community development would span more than 12,000 acres and would include 28,000 homes, golf courses, vineyards, resorts and commercial buildings, potentially increasing the population of the riverside town from 5,000 to as many as 75,000. Doing so could increase groundwater pumping from approximately 800 acre-feet to as much as 13,000 acre-feet per year, sucking water from aquifers that maintain the San Pedro's stream flows. The development would also increase stormwater runoff and flooding and lead to destructive sediment accumulation in the river.

This ongoing problem was exacerbated in 2020, when the Trump administration issued what has become known as the "Dirty Water Rule," which cut millions of streams and wetlands out of safeguards guaranteed by the Clean Water Act by excluding them from the definition of "Waters of the U.S." Modeling showed that nearly 94 percent of all wetlands and flowlines in Arizona's Upper San Pedro watershed would lose protection under the Rule. By omitting small, headwater, seasonal and intermittent streams from protection, the Dirty Water Rule allowed the very sources of many of our rivers and streams, including the San Pedro, to be polluted or destroyed, negatively impacting downstream waters. If we do not address these threats to both types of water sources for the San Pedro, especially in light of a changing climate and increasing levels of drought in the Southwest, the river may dry up for good.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

First, the Biden administration must issue a more robust, science-based rule clearly defining the Waters of the U.S. to protect all our nation's waters and ensure against the degradation of treasured places, like the San Pedro. The administration will likely commence a rulemaking process in Spring 2022 by soliciting public comments on how to protect our waters and the public must resound that protecting small streams under the Clean Water Act is the only acceptable option.

Second, Arizona legislators must pass laws limiting groundwater withdrawals. Right now, outside of the central, populous parts of the state, there are no restrictions on how much groundwater can be pumped, and no limits on the number of wells that can be drilled. Arizona must address this issue and protect groundwater in rural Arizona— for healthy rivers and communities.

The San Pedro River has long inspired passionate defenders, who have succeeded in fighting back threats and protecting the river for future generations. That work must continue if the river is to survive the ever-increasing threats of excessive groundwater pumping and regulatory rollbacks.