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## Proposed urban refuge eyeing management details, gathering input

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The Santa Cruz River looking south from Continental Road. The proposed Urban National Wildlife Refuge would span the river from the U.S.-Mexico border north to the Pinal County line.

**Jorge Encinas Green Valley News**



Organizers say maintenance and enforcement are among the different aspects that will be fleshed out during the planning process for a potential wildlife refuge passing through Green Valley and Sahuarita.

The proposed Urban National Wildlife Refuge would run from the U.S.-Mexico border north to the Pinal County line, cutting a corridor extending a half-mile on each side of the Santa Cruz River.

The corridor only designates land that could be included in the refuge through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service purchases from property owners opting to sell their land. Property owners who don't voluntarily sell their land to Fish and Wildlife would not be affected and no regulations up or downstream would impact private property owners.

Green Valley Council President Debbie Kenyon said she first learned about the proposed refuge a month before a formal multi-jurisdictional partnership was signed with Fish and Wildlife at the Historic Canoa Ranch on Nov. 21. The Canoa Ranch signing established the Santa Cruz River Wildlife Partnership between Fish and Wildlife, the City of Tucson and Pima and Santa Cruz counties.

It also marks the first formal step toward an official Urban National Wildlife Refuge designation, which is an executive action approved by the Secretary of the Interior. There are 101 Urban National Wildlife Refuges in the United States. The proposed urban refuge along the Santa Cruz River would mark the first one in Arizona. An urban refuge must be within 25 miles of a population center with 250,000 or more people.

Kenyon said her concern is about who would be responsible for maintaining any designated land opting into the refuge and who would provide enforcement for any misuses taking place.

"Since it's multi-jurisdictional and multi-county," she said. "The procedural stuff on that end."

The GVC held a forum Dec. 5, with representatives from organizations working to attain an official urban refuge designation, including The Wilderness Society.

Wilderness Society Designation Director Axie Navas told the Green Valley News on Tuesday that Fish and Wildlife would own any land opting into the refuge, but enforcement and maintenance would be a more nuanced process involving partnerships.

"Typically what happens on a fee-title refuge — land where the Wildlife Service owns it — they are the land manager making those enforcement decisions," she said. "I know in practice that often comes about in partnership with local law enforcement, local community groups."

Nava said there are questions of management that come from a public planning process and then enforcement from partners on the ground but varies from refuge to refuge. She said there is precedent for partnerships with local law enforcement.

"I would say this idea is still years out from some of those specifics on the ground because you need that conservation footprint first and then you need the land to be purchased," Nava said. "Those management decisions also come about after extensive public input and a public planning process."

## **Gathering input**

Kenyon said she always sees preservation and conservation movements as potential boosts to an area, but found there also needs to be a full evaluation of any impacts the projects would have on nearby communities.

"Everyone is always concerned with what this is going to cost, but my questions were more on the back end of who is going to maintain and depending on what usage permitting is going to be there, how is this going to be protected?" she said.

Nava said maintenance is also something that could work in partnership with other organizations in the community, including leadership teams evaluating what issues are happening within the refuge.

"I would say one of the benefits of refuge designation is that it tends to bring in more federal funding for maintenance and trail access and that type of thing," Nava said, adding the details would be ironed out before a designation occurred.

Kenyon said the GVC would hold more forums if the coalition of partners like The Wilderness Society or Tucson-based nonprofit Sonoran Institute asked for them.

"I think there were some very good questions that were proposed, and I think they were very viable questions that were proposed by the people who were in attendance," she said about the Dec. 5 GVC forum.

One question from the Green Valley/Sahuarita Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center President and CEO Randy Graf during the forum was about whether the coalition of partners planned to gather input from the business community and property owners. Graf also asked about impacts a refuge would have on businesses and property owners.

Nava said she has been involved with other urban refuges around the country including the Valle de Oro Urban National Wildlife Refuge near Albuquerque, adding that refuges proposed by community members like the one along the Santa Cruz are more rare.

She said the refuge is in many ways still at the very beginning of the planning process and the partnership coalition would be doing more outreach to stakeholders in the community as it progresses, including the business community.

"And so those conversations and meetings are just getting started, it's not like the train has left the station – this is a community effort," Nava said.

As for impacts to businesses and property owners, Nava said the refuge would be on an opt-in basis only and no one has to sell property to Fish and Wildlife for conservation. She said regulation also wouldn't impact any businesses or owners in the corridor who don't opt-in or are near properties that do.

"I think that's where that map can be confusing, frankly, but there are no regulatory changes within that conservatory footprint," Nava said about the refuge corridor. "This is not a water quality or quantity regulation. All that conservation footprint does is allow Fish and Wildlife to purchase land from people who opt-in."

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