

Arizona

2025 Annual Report

The Nature
Conservancy



Letter From the State Director



Dear Friends,

Even in these challenging times, I am proud to say that TNC in Arizona has accomplished a great deal this past year. As you will read, we are protecting our most vulnerable watersheds and wildlife habitat, safeguarding our public lands, innovating forest management and resiliency, and building healthy cities.

Beyond our magnificent state's borders, some of my most impactful experiences this year have involved our learning exchanges in Baja California Peninsula and the Sagebrush Sea.

Both experiences underscored the idea that we must continue to scale local conservation work up to a global level to create a future with a livable climate, healthy communities and thriving nature.

The seas surrounding the Baja California Peninsula are among the richest on Earth—more than a quarter of the world's marine mammals call it home, including the iconic blue whale. There is a direct link from our work to protect the Colorado River in Arizona to the Gulf of California in Mexico.

Thousands of miles north, I joined my colleagues to learn about the Sagebrush Sea, a mosaic of

grasslands spanning 150 million acres across the American West. The work to protect the Sagebrush Sea is not dissimilar to our efforts in Arizona to safeguard land and water at scale in the Apache Highlands ecoregion, which includes some of the most ecologically important land in Arizona and where we have been working for more than 50 years.

As I reflect on those experiences, it's clear to me that our work is more important than ever. The challenges we face in the conservation space—punctuated by recent shifts in federal policy and investments—are not small.

Yet I take comfort in knowing that even in the face of change, TNC is uniquely suited to meet this moment. Our nearly 75-year track record of science-based, nonpartisan work gives us outsized credibility in these times. We continue to find common ground with decisionmakers and stakeholders across the political and ideological spectrum.

One example was our effort to keep millions of acres of public lands in the West in public hands. In Arizona, we collaborated with a diverse group of leaders, including the Cattle Growers Association, The Wilderness Federation and the Trails Association in calling on Congress to uphold America's legacy of safeguarding our treasured places.

I am confident that with the generosity of our donors, guidance of our trustees, talent of our staff and collaboration of our partners, we can continue to make meaningful progress—not just in Arizona, but everywhere.

Thank you for your support!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Daniel S. Stellar".

State Director, The Nature Conservancy in Arizona

The Nature Conservancy in Arizona

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The Nature Conservancy has worked in Arizona since 1966. Thanks to your support, we've achieved transformative progress—accelerating forest health, advancing freshwater sustainability, protecting critical wildlife habitat, and mitigating climate change and urban heat over the past nearly 60 years.

By the numbers

5+ billion

Gallons of water saved through innovative programs and partnerships on our rivers, lakes and watersheds



1.6 million acres

Played a role in the protection of lands important to wildlife and people



1.4 million acres*

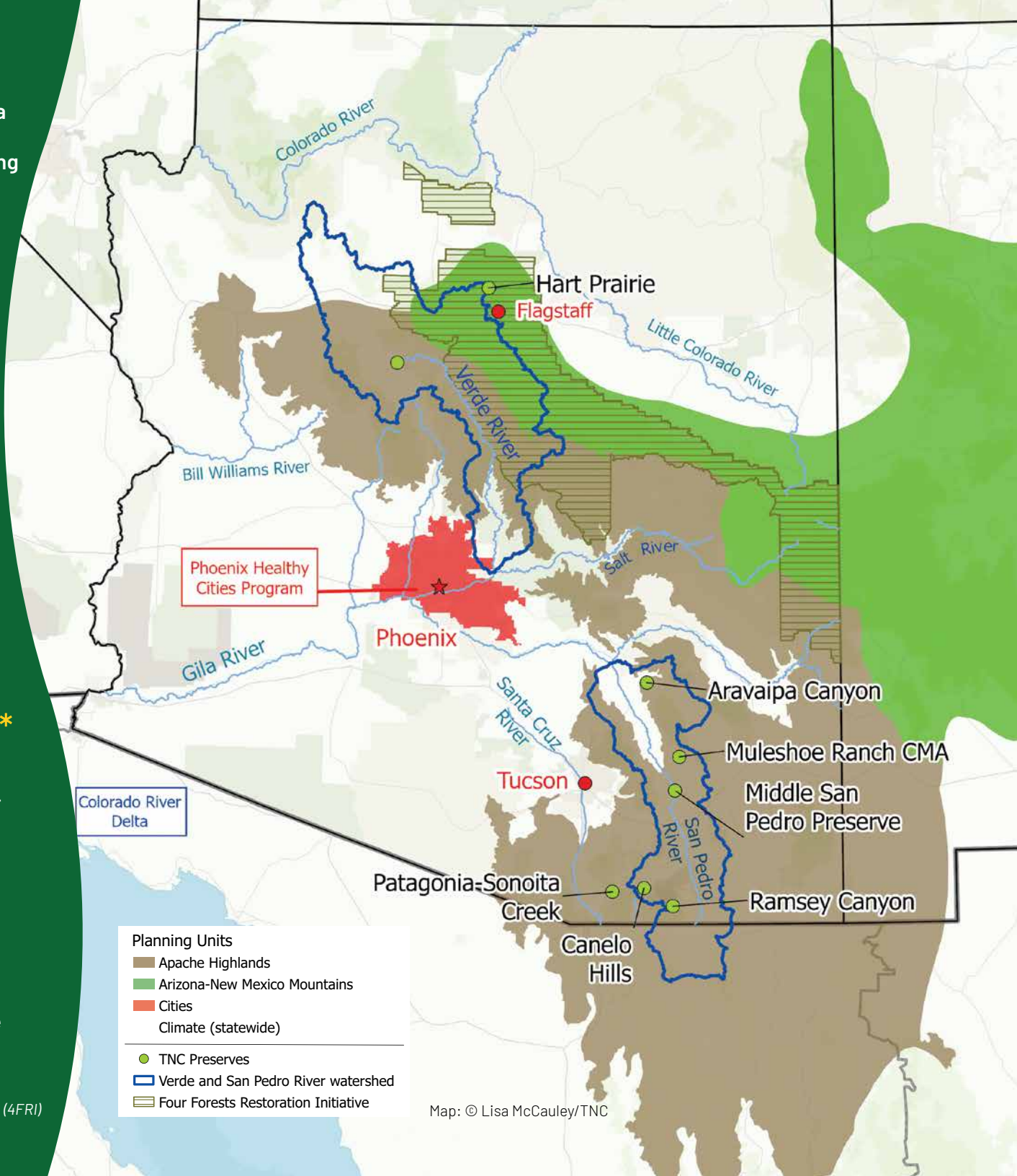
Contributed to the restoration of wildfire-prone forest since 2010, working in collaboration with local, state and federal partners and industry groups



125,538

People helped in Phoenix adapt to climate change through increased tree canopy cover to mitigate extreme heat

*Based on numbers reported by the USFS Four Forest Restoration (4FRI)





Connecting Wild Lands

Apache Highlands' Migration Superhighway

In the heart of the Southwest—where the saguaro-studded Sonoran Desert meets the tall mesas of the Colorado Plateau—lies one of North America's most ecologically rich and diverse regions: the Apache Highlands Ecoregion.

Stretching across central and southeastern Arizona and into northern Mexico, this rugged landscape is a mosaic of grasslands, forests and riparian corridors that support an astonishing array of wildlife.

For nearly 60 years, The Nature Conservancy (TNC) has worked in the Apache Highlands ecoregion, a biodiversity hotspot where conservation is not just about protecting land—but about connecting it.

"The goal is to protect not just specific borders, but diverse, vast and interconnected spaces that provide multiple habitat options for different wildlife species," says Kim Schonek, TNC Arizona Water Program Director. "Apache Highlands' network of forests, grasslands, streams, springs and ciénegas serves as a migration superhighway for wildlife on land and water."

This "migration superhighway" is what drives TNC to safeguard not just isolated habitats, but entire ecological networks. This means protecting the land where ecosystems converge, and where species find the space to thrive.

TNC owns and manages about 17,000 acres of land in the Apache Highlands. TNC nature preserves

are a big part of that acreage and play an essential role for the survival of many species—providing safe passageways, breeding grounds and critical habitats. The preserves also serve as living laboratories where conservation staff advance scientific research.

"By maintaining a consistent presence in these unique landscapes and prioritizing conservation, we are able to adapt our management strategies to benefit species diversity," says Erin Creekmur, TNC Arizona Stewardship Director. "As a result, we have witnessed species thriving in habitats where they had not been seen for decades."

A Landscape of Connection

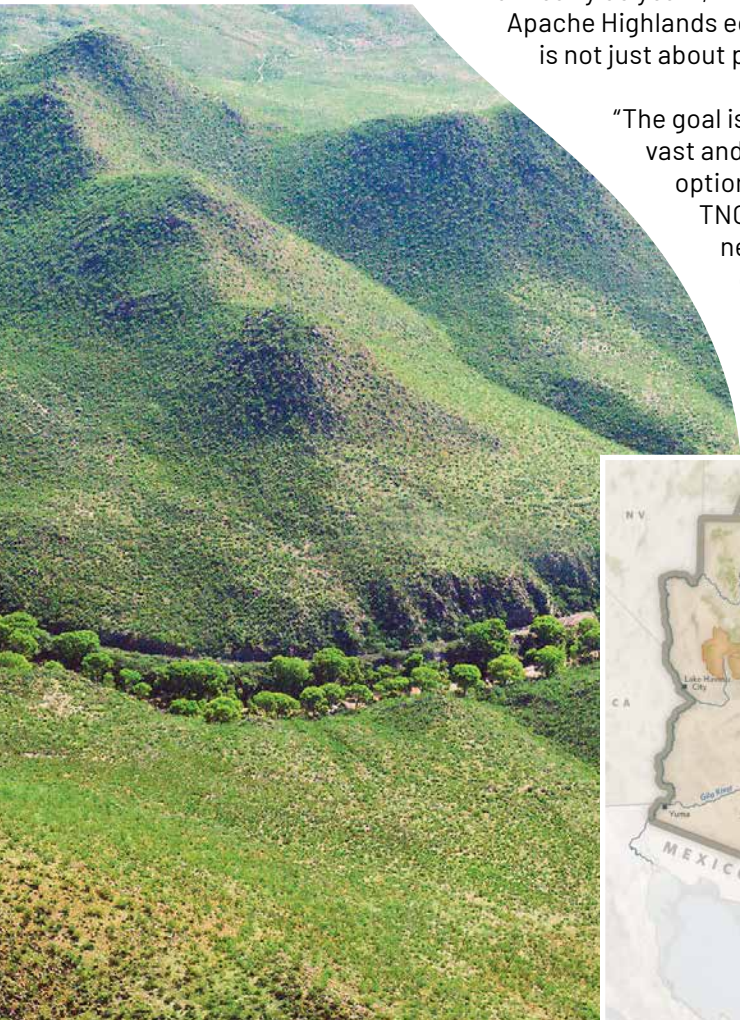
One of the region's greatest strengths is its diversity. From the low desert valleys to the high-elevation ponderosa pine forests, the Apache Highlands offers a range of habitats that support species like pronghorn, bighorn sheep, coatis, burrowing owls and migrating birds.

Even the elusive jaguar in recent years has reclaimed its range in the borderland region of southern Arizona. These species don't stay in one place—they roam, migrate and adapt. That's why TNC conservation efforts here focus on connectivity.

By protecting open spaces that span multiple elevations and habitat types, TNC conservationists are creating corridors that allow wildlife to move freely across the landscape.

Collaboration is Key

Key to this success is the strategic protection of land across different ecoregions.



TNC employs a variety of tools to protect Arizona's most sensitive lands and waters, including conservation easements, land acquisition and restoration projects. Collaborative partnerships with state and federal land managers—along with a variety of collaborators, including farmers, agricultural communities, ranchers, tribes and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—are also crucial efforts to leverage our impact.

These efforts are ultimately aimed at ensuring wildlife have multiple pathways, diverse habitats, and the ability to adapt in the face of climate change and human development.

"Protecting wildlife corridors is a shared responsibility. Only through collaboration across government agencies, communities and conservation partners can we ensure that nature's pathways remain connected, resilient and thriving for generations to come," says Jody Norris, TNC Arizona Protection Program Director.

TNC often supports the work of partners to increase the scale of this important work. A recent example was in June, when TNC assisted The Trust for Public Land in completing a conservation easement to protect 4,200 acres of native grasslands and wildlife habitat in the Sky Islands of the Apache Highlands. The easement conserves the land while maintaining the historic Pinery Creek Ranch, whose origins date to the 1880s.

Biodiversity Hotspots: Springs and Ciénegas

Springs and ciénegas serve as shelter for wildlife, providing consistent resources like water, food and shade—especially crucial in times of drought.

Although springs have a small geographic footprint, they are abundant features of the landscape—with more than 10,000 found in Arizona alone. Spring ecosystems support more than 10 percent of the listed endangered species, in addition to countless rare and endemic species in the United States.

Ciénegas, or desert wetlands, were historically widespread across Arizona and the greater Southwest, providing essential water sources for indigenous communities, early settlers

and diverse wildlife. However, due to agricultural expansion, groundwater depletion, climate change and erosion, many ciénegas have disappeared.

TNC's Canelo Hills Ciénega Preserve remains one of the last intact examples, offering insights into wetland ecology and conservation efforts.

Part of TNC's work at Canelo Hills Ciénega Preserve is focused on restoring and safeguarding the habitat for a rare species of orchid known as the Canelo Hills ladies' tresses (*Spiranthes delitescens*). This endangered orchid's wild habitat exists only in southern Arizona.

Populations of the orchids are in decline, and despite protective measures, the species has not been seen at Canelo Hills in more than a decade. As part of a recovery project with the Desert Botanical Garden—a key partner of TNC—the first documented bloom in propagation occurred in a lab in the spring 2025. Those fragile blooms offer a promising sign for the orchid's potential return to the wild at Canelo Hills.

"This is a huge win for conservation and our goal to bring these species back to their native landscapes like Canelo Hills," says Creekmur.

TNC's focus on the protection and restoration of springs and ciénegas is expected to have an outsized impact on biodiversity and resilience of the Apache Highlands. Research and practice have shown that both are resilient systems that respond well to restoration efforts.

A Model for the Future

The work in the Apache Highlands is a model for landscape-scale conservation. It shows that protecting nature isn't just about saving species—it's about preserving the systems that sustain them.

By focusing on connectivity, diversity and resilience, TNC conservationists are building a future where wildlife and wild places can continue to thrive.



Granite Creek Restoration: To 'Leave Legacy' on Tribal Land

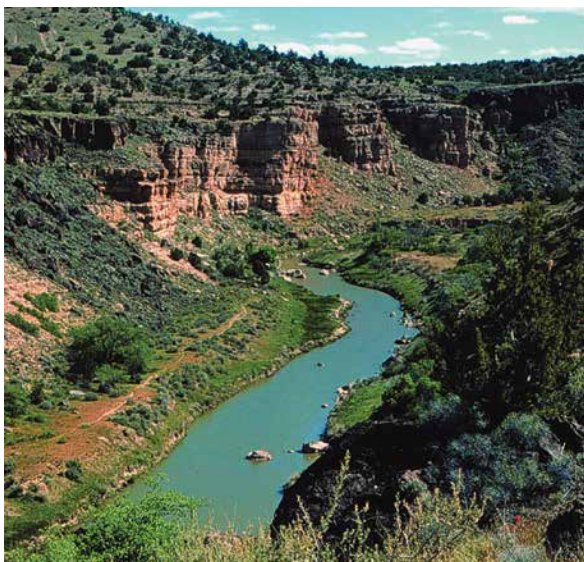
Granite Creek flows north before connecting to the Verde River, which provides water from Prescott to the Phoenix metro area.

The Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe (YPIT) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) worked in partnership to vastly improve its water quality and storage in and around Granite Creek in Prescott, Arizona.

As a result of improved streamside habitat, native trees and plants will flourish to support birds and wildlife that call this place home.

"Granite Creek is not only a vital resource of the Upper Verde River watershed, but it also holds significant cultural importance to the Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe," says Peter Bourgois, Tribal planner for YPIT. "The Tribe is very fortunate to have had the opportunity to partner with TNC. The project will leave a legacy for the enjoyment and benefit of future generations by improving, enhancing and protecting the natural and cultural values of Granite Creek as it crosses the Tribe's homelands."

The project began with the removal of tons of concrete waste from previous concrete production and gravel mining activities. Later, crews placed natural materials—boulders, stones, wood and sticks—at intervals along the waterway. Crews also built "Zuni bowls" a riparian restoration method used to reduce erosion, slow water runoff and allow native vegetation to take hold and thrive.



The structures help slow the water as it spreads across the land so it's available when needed most. Removing non-native plants and distributing cottonwood and willow cuttings rounded out the riparian restoration work.

"This collaborative effort benefits the Tribe, as well as the larger community, by improving water quality and promoting a healthy habitat near Watson Lake, a recreation hotspot for locals and visitors," says Selena Pao, Water Projects Manager.

MAP: The Yavapai-Prescott Indian Tribe and TNC worked to improve water quality, water storage and riparian habitat in and around Granite Creek near Prescott, Arizona. © TNC; LEFT: Verde River Canyon at Old Morgan Ranch near the mouth of Granite Creek © Harold E. Malde; Celene Hawkins © Esme Cadiente



Meet Celene Hawkins, TNC's New Colorado River Program Director



Celene Hawkins has been working in the Colorado River Basin for more than 15 years and has extensive experience in water law and working with Tribal Nations. She brings a passion for partnership, as well as a critical understanding of projects and policies that will be paramount to the role as she leads the program at an extremely pivotal time for the entire basin.

We asked Celene a few questions about her connection to the Colorado River and her new role.

Tell us about your background and what brought you to The Nature Conservancy?

I grew up in northern Nevada and Northern California (in the eastern Sierras) before heading east to the Intermountain West to study and work. I have always lived in places experiencing water scarcity and that are in or connected to management of the Colorado River Basin. During my childhood, I had a lot of kitchen table discussions with family friends who were active in the Quincy Library Group (an early multi-

stakeholder collaboration that addressed local forest management and endangered species issues). I knew from an early age I wanted to focus on conservation work, and this early exposure helped shape my life and career path.

I came to The Nature Conservancy because of the organization's non-partisan and solutions-oriented approach to work in the Colorado River Basin. I wanted to be part of an organization that was building a better future for the Colorado River Basin (and that worked to protect the Basin for both nature and people).

What are you most excited about in your new role as program director?

I am really excited to work with The Nature Conservancy's staff across the Colorado River Basin to care for the Colorado River. TNC has amazing teams working in every U.S. state in the Basin, with many Tribal Nation partners, and in Mexico in the Colorado River Delta.

Rising to the Challenge

Turning Policy Uncertainty
Into Conservation Impact



It's been a transformative year for conservation—marked by shifting federal policies, priorities and investments. Through it all, your steadfast support and TNC's science-driven, nonpartisan approach have continued to deliver real impact in Arizona and across the country. Together, we're proving that collaboration and evidence-based solutions can shape a future where nature and people thrive.

Government action remains one of our most powerful tools for creating lasting, science-based policies that safeguard land, water and a sustainable future—especially as we confront the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss.

Defending our Public Lands

With your support, TNC was able to help defeat a U.S. Senate proposal to mandate the sale of more than a million public acres across 11 western states. This proposal would have stripped public access to lands

larger than Grand Canyon National Park. The outpouring of support for public lands was inspiring: The Nature Conservancy alone sent more than 100,000 letters to Congress, signed by members and supporters across the country. We know that threats to our cherished natural places still exist, which is why we are continuing to educate and engage strategically on this issue.

Thawing the Freeze on Forest Funding

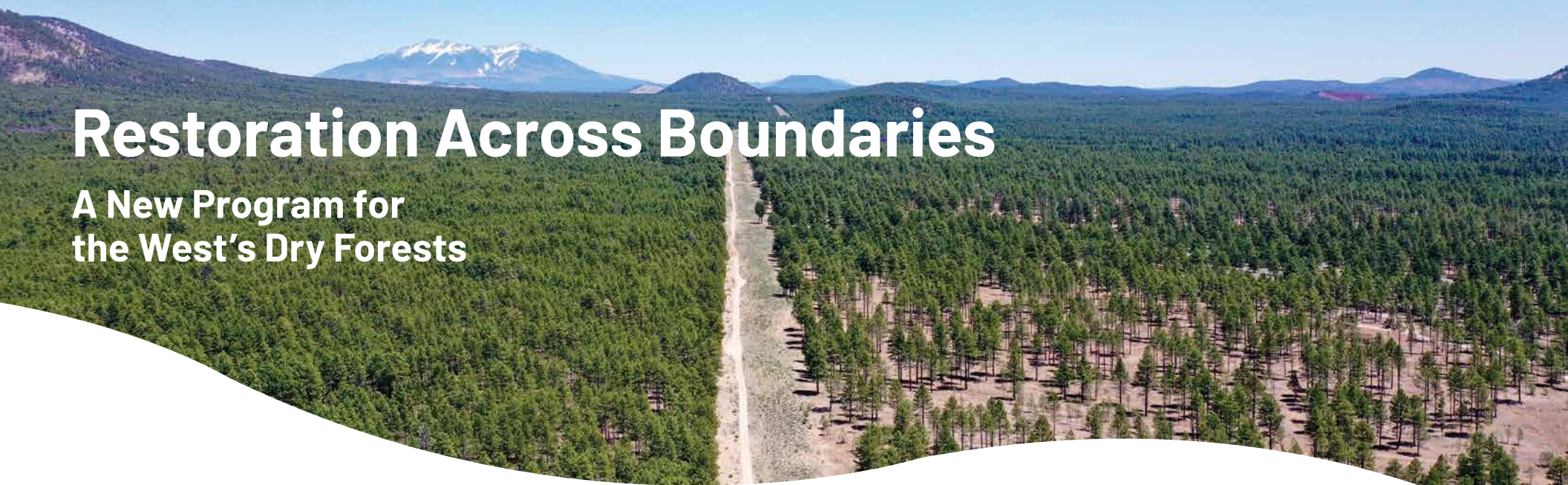
When we learned that \$7 million in funding for the Bill Williams Steep Slope Forest Restoration Project near Flagstaff was at risk, we acted immediately. Leveraging our reputation as a trusted partner to our congressional delegation, The Nature Conservancy and Coconino County engaged Arizona Rep. Eli Crane to intervene. Within hours, Rep. Crane personally delivered a joint letter from TNC and Coconino County to USDA leadership, urging the release of funds. The response was swift: Within 24 hours,

USDA Secretary Brooke Rollins reopened the project portal—making this at one time the only project in the U.S. that was granted an exception.

Cleaning Up Abandoned Mines

TNC Arizona and Trustee Karen Peters helped champion the "Good Samaritan Remediation of Abandoned Hardrock Mines Act," which was co-sponsored by Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly and signed by President Biden in December 2024. The act enables qualified conservation organizations and state agencies to voluntarily clean-up long-abandoned mine sites that jeopardize the health of communities through environmental hazards like toxic drainage and groundwater contamination. The law cuts red tape and accelerates the cleanup of abandoned mines in Arizona that pose a threat to public health, particularly in communities that have borne the brunt of environmental pollution for decades.

TNC Arizona staff, trustees and partners with U.S. Sens. Ruben Gallego and Mark Kelly at the U.S. Capitol © TNC



Restoration Across Boundaries

A New Program for the West's Dry Forests

Growing across 150 million acres of the Western United States and Canada, western dry forests are critically important landscapes that filter and supply water for millions of people, provide economic opportunities in rural communities, support diverse habitat for wildlife and are places of cultural meaning.

Historically, ponderosa pine and mixed conifers formed park-like canopies. Tall and large trees dominated this landscape, and dappled sunlight nurtured shrubs and grasses, upon which animals like deer and elk would browse and roam.

However, dry forests are out of balance, overgrown and under threat. These forests depend on the benefits of low- and medium-intensity fire, which clears out dead and competing vegetation and recycles much-needed nutrients. More than a century of policies and practices have removed beneficial fire from the landscape, leaving forests and communities vulnerable to extreme wildfire.

A new TNC initiative has been taking root in addressing this threat. Established in 2024, the Western Dry Forests Program is working closely with federal agencies, states and partners across the West to

lead and convene collaborative restoration actions, recognizing that the greatest benefit to dry forest ecosystems are gained by working across public and private boundaries.

This year alone, the program helped advance legislation in western states that creates more opportunities for prescribed burning by reducing the financial risk that has limited burning in the past. It's also been working in partnership with TNC state teams to research and prioritize where restoration is most impactful for forests and communities, while also supporting projects on the ground.

Arizona Leads the Way on Restoration

In Arizona, extreme heat and drought—coupled with a century of fire suppression—have created a tinderbox of small-diameter trees susceptible to uncharacteristically severe wildfires.

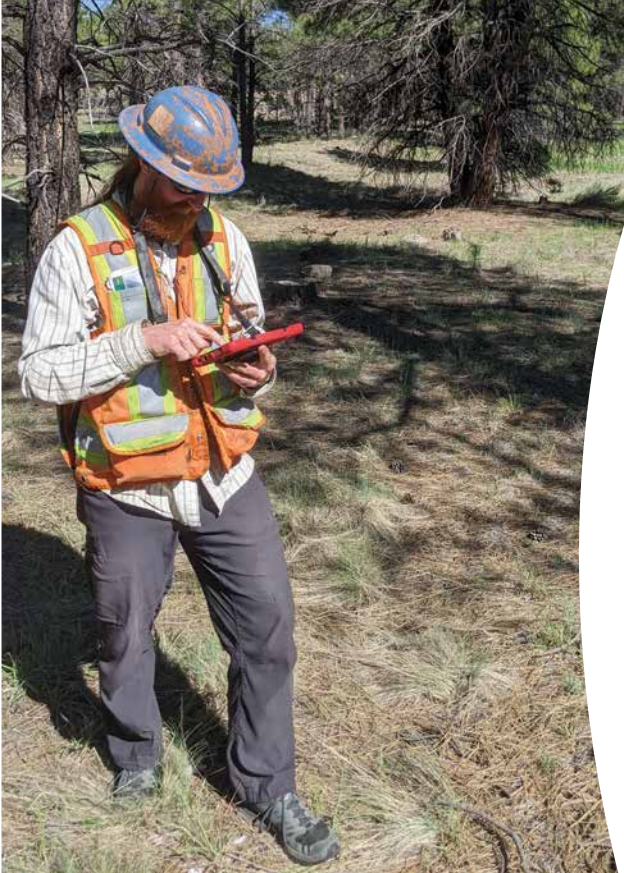
Previously, healthy forests in Arizona supported less than 100 trees an acre. Today, forests here can have upward of 1,500 trees per acre. That's why TNC is focused on restoring the historic forest structure

and balance that was dominated by large mature trees. This promotes resilience, enriches the soil, replenishes aquifers, keeps forest communities safer and plays a key role in sequestering carbon.

In partnership with the USDA Forest Service and many other stakeholders, TNC has been working to increase the pace and scale of thinning in the Four Forest Restoration Initiative (4FRI), with a goal of restoring more than 2 million acres across the Kaibab, Coconino, Apache-Sitgreaves and Tonto National Forests.

"The Forest Program brings people and organizations together to lead and improve forest restoration efforts," says Nicole Kennan, TNC AZ Forest Program Project Manager. "By creatively applying innovative approaches that boost efficiency and build capacity, the program has increased the number of acres restored—and is doing it faster than ever before."

To learn more about TNC's efforts to restore our forests across the West, visit [Nature.org/westerndryforests](https://www.nature.org/westerndryforests).



Digital Tools Transform Forest Restoration

Arizona's Cutting-Edge Forest Prep is Faster, Cheaper—and Ready to be Replicated across the West

Arizona forest crews using digital tools like tablets, satellite imagery, and LiDAR were able to prepare 10 times more land for treatment, five times faster, and at one-tenth the cost of traditional paint-marking methods.

These striking results come from a first-of-its-kind forest restoration demonstration on the Coconino National Forest in Arizona. The findings, published in August in the *Journal of Forestry*, are part of the Walker Hill Project, a collaboration among The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in Arizona, Northern Arizona University, the USDA Forest Service and Paul Smith's College.

The use of technology demonstrates how on-the-ground solutions like this can increase the pace of restoration throughout our western dry forests to improve resilience and reduce wildfire threats.

"The digital-marking technology clearly demonstrates how forest managers can save time and money, and equally as important, increase the pace of preparing forests for restoration," says Travis Woolley, a co-author of the paper and a Forest Ecologist for The Nature Conservancy in Arizona. "It's encouraging to know that other forests in the West are already exploring how to adapt our approach to improve their own forest management tactics."

TOP TO BOTTOM: © Mark Nabel/USDA Forest Service;
© Erika Nortemann/TNC

Restoring Forests, Reviving Communities

The Economic Power of Nature-Based Solutions

It's well-known that forest restoration has vast benefits, including reduced wildfire risk in communities and improved habitat for native species, but a new study led by The Nature Conservancy in Arizona sheds light on a benefit often not quantified: the economic impact of forest restoration.

The study found that in 2023, restoration activities involving about 17,000 acres in northern Arizona fueled \$216 million in economic impact and supported more than 1,000 full- and part-time jobs.

While focused on results in Arizona, the study portends similar takeaways for other states with western dry forests, where TNC is working to make landscapes better adapted to the impacts of climate change across the American West.

Arizona's hotter, drier climate and a century of fire suppression in the West have created a tinderbox of small-diameter trees susceptible to uncharacteristically severe wildfires. In response, TNC is taking a leading role in removing small-diameter trees highly susceptible to fire risk.

The study examined industries in forest restoration, including harvesting, chipping, grinding, sawmills, mechanics, trucking, maintenance and more.

"There was an assumption that restoration is a significant contributor to the economies of our rural communities. However, we lacked data to fully understand the extent," says Joel Jurgens, Arizona Forest Program Director. "This analysis now informs federal agencies, state and municipal partners, policymakers, and private sector of the positive impacts to the economy of northern Arizona."

Protecting Nature Starts With Science

Curiosity is the deep, persistent desire to understand, explore and learn. It's what drives TNC Arizona's Science Program.

This team of seven dedicated professionals gathers data, monitors ecosystem health, uses models to map habitats, tests innovative field technologies, and more—delivering evidence-based solutions that benefit both people and nature.

"Science is our compass: It brings clarity to complexity and helps us navigate conservation challenges with the confidence we need to address the world's most pressing challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss," says Marcos Robles, Lead Scientist for The Nature Conservancy in Arizona. "Science also serves as a bridge to conservation policies, which can remove barriers and make the case for critical investments."

At TNC AZ, our scientists help us shape new policies, target priority projects and identify ways we can scale success. The team works across the state to support our forests, grasslands and freshwater.

For example, freshwater scientist Jessie Pearl is augmenting the San Pedro River wet/dry mapping with winter and spring



data—adding to the annual summer collection. This will generate a cutting-edge model for mapping perennial reaches of the rivers and tributaries in the San Pedro River.

Meanwhile, Gita Bodner—working alongside key partners—is developing surveys and mapping of our Canelo Hills Preserve wetlands and vegetation to determine how effective prescribed fire would be to restore the habitat.

With curiosity as their guide and science as their foundation, TNC Arizona's scientists are lighting the path toward a more livable climate, safe communities and healthy wildlife.

TNC Volunteers: Expanding the Reach of Our Mission

The Nature Conservancy was founded on grassroots action by volunteers with the shared vision of conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. Nearly 60 years later, this legacy of volunteerism perseveres in Arizona.



For each conservation achievement we celebrate, we owe a hefty measure of success to the network of indispensable allies who volunteer their time, energy and passion to create a world where nature and people can thrive.

In Arizona alone, more than 300 volunteers dedicated 15,226 hours to conservation projects this year, ranging from administrative work to heavy labor in remote areas. TNC volunteers are the stewards who greet visitors at our preserves, plant shade trees, maintain trails, map rivers and streams, document wildlife, educate community members—and much more.

In short, their efforts greatly improve efficiency, along with the reach of our conservation impact. For example: Volunteer hours this year were equal to having an additional eight, full-time employees—an estimated value of more than a \$500 million in staff time.

"The preserve at Hart Prairie transports you back in time to what the area must have been like 100 years ago. In a sense, it's a time capsule that captures a moment of time in nature, and in our country's history, that you immediately become a part of."

— Deanna and Mike De Cou, stewardship volunteers at Hart Prairie Preserve and Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve.

From Dancing Cranes to Lasting Change

A Couple's \$20M Gift to The Nature Conservancy

Sue Hart-Wadley and **Searle Wadley** evoke smiles and laughter as they reminisce about their time on their property in Antioch, Illinois, near Chicago. Each spring, staff from the Department of Natural Resources would arrive to monitor the protected sandhill cranes during mating season—a spectacle that never failed to entertain.

"We got such a chuckle out of watching the sandhill cranes go through their courtship," Sue recalls. "They jump up and down and do this dance. It's very comical to watch."

From hosting the magnificent cranes to Canada geese and great horned owls, the Wadleys' pristine 60 acres of wetlands evolved into a haven for scientists conducting research on many wildlife species and advancing conservation projects.

Before relocating to Arizona for its warmer climate and exceptional birding opportunities, the Wadleys partnered with The Nature Conservancy in Illinois to protect the natural values of their property through a conservation easement.



That marked the beginning of their 30-year journey with TNC.

The 'Joy of Giving While Living'

This year, Sue and Searle made a landmark, \$20 million donation to The Nature Conservancy—the largest gift in the Arizona chapter's history. In doing so, the couple chose to accelerate their planned gift so they could experience the "joy of giving while living," rather than giving as part of their estate plan.

They also recognized the urgency of growing environmental challenges and felt the time to act is now.

Their generosity will fuel transformational conservation efforts in Arizona, across the Western United States and globally. The funding will support forest restoration in the fire-prone landscapes of Arizona and the West. It will also bolster TNC's global science and policy initiatives, helping scale successful models across continents.

"There's an urgent need to improve forests, grasslands, and rivers as the world becomes hotter and drier," Searle says. "We want to witness the work and feel the joy our donation will spark."

Like any investment, the Wadleys are eager to see meaningful returns—measured not in dollars, but in ecological resilience and community impact.

Their deep appreciation for science is woven into every aspect of their philanthropy. Both spent their careers at Abbott Laboratories, a global pharmaceutical company—Searle as a microbiologist and Sue as a human resources specialist. They share a belief that asking important questions and a healthy curiosity can illuminate solutions to the world's most pressing challenges.

The couple also admires TNC's ability to convene diverse stakeholders—from ranchers and tribal leaders to policymakers and scientists—to co-create innovative solutions that begin locally and scale globally.

TNC Arizona State Director Dan Stellar is effusive in his gratitude for the couple's strategic counsel, friendship and generosity: "In addition to their generous support, the Wadleys bring critical and creative thinking to our conversations, which helps us be better. And they are just tremendous people on a personal level."

Sue and Searle's story is a testament to how curiosity, commitment and compassion can shape a better future—for nature, for wildlife and for all of us.



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