



Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection

300 E. University Blvd., Suite 120
Tucson, Arizona 85705
p (520) 388-9925 • f (520) 791-7709
www.sonorandesert.org

March 20, 2014

Arizona Center for Law
in the Public Interest

Arizona League of Conservation
Voters Education Fund

Arizona Native Plant Society

Bat Conservation International

Cascabel Conservation
Association

Center for Biological Diversity

Center for Environmental
Connections

Center for Environmental Ethics

Defenders of Wildlife

Desert Watch

Drylands Institute

Empire Fagan Coalition

Environmental and Cultural
Conservation Organization

Environmental Law Society

Friends of Cabeza Prieta

Friends of Ironwood Forest

Friends of Madera Canyon

Friends of Saguaro National
Park

Friends of Tortolita

Gates Pass Area Neighborhood
Association

Native Seeds/SEARCH

Neighborhood Coalition of
Greater Tucson

Northwest Neighborhoods
Alliance

Protect Land and
Neighborhoods

Safford Peak Watershed
Education Team

Save the Scenic Santa Ritas

Sierra Club—Grand Canyon
Chapter

Sierra Club—Rincon Group

Silverbell Mountain Alliance

Sky Island Alliance

Sky Island Watch

Society for Ecological
Restoration

Sonoran Arthropod
Studies Institute

Sonoran Permaculture Guild

Southwestern Biological
Institute

Tortolita Homeowners
Association

Tucson Audubon Society

Tucson Herpetological Society

Tucson Mountains Association

Wildlands Network

Women for Sustainable
Technologies

Mr. Larry Hecker, Chair
Pima County Bond Advisory Committee
130 W Congress St., 10th Floor
Tucson, AZ 85701

Dear Mr. Hecker and Committee Members,

I submit the enclosed comments on behalf of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, founded in 1998 and comprised of 41 environmental and community groups working in Pima County. The Coalition's mission is to achieve the long-term conservation of the Sonoran Desert through comprehensive land-use planning, with primary emphasis on Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

The Coalition has an active interest in the allocation of open space bond funds. These public funds are necessary to purchase valuable open space for protection. As in past bond elections, these purchases are intended to ensure the lasting health and integrity of the Sonoran Desert and contribute to the conservation of important habitat areas. In previous county bond elections, Pima County voters showed overwhelming support for acquiring conservation lands.

As stated in Pima County's Sustainable Action Plan (August 2008), *"The County will acquire land and facilities that are best suited for the intended use and will most effectively achieve the goals of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan"*.

The Coalition is concerned about two categories of open space, Habitat Protection Priorities and Associated Lands (HPP) and Community Open Space (COS). HPP was developed in 2003 to identify the most biologically important lands under Pima County's Multi-Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) and the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP). These lands are vital to the survival of vulnerable plant and animal species and are critical to the protection of water quality and flood prevention. COS lands are valuable for maintaining natural open spaces, protecting scenic views, recreational opportunities, and biological and cultural resources.

In 2010, the Conservation Acquisition Commission (CAC) recommended to the Bond Advisory Committee (BAC) and the Board of Supervisors that an amount of \$285 million be allocated in the next countywide bond package. The BAC has "tentatively approved" an amount of \$110 million for HPP and \$10 million for COS, less than half of what was recommended by the county's Commission.

The amount of funding for open space needs to be sufficient to purchase eligible lands that are critical to the success of the SDCP, and that may become available in the 10 to 15-year bond cycle. The Conservation Acquisition Program was designed to accomplish SDCP goals of preserving biologically important lands. The Coalition remains concerned that the currently recommended open space funding allocation will be insufficient to achieve habitat acreage goals within this bond cycle.

As you are aware from the open space project sheets (attached), lands that are eligible for purchase for open space amount to \$2.8 billion; the CAC recommended that \$285 million, or approximately 10 percent of the total amount identified, be included in the next bond package.

Some of the specific needs acknowledged are as follows:

1. Over 400,000 acres of important State Trust Land alone are eligible for acquisition.
 - Approximately 2500 acres of the Arroyo Grande wildlife linkage lands remain to be acquired north of Oro Valley. This will expand Tortolita Mountain Park to the east, reconnecting to Catalina State Park (with the RTA-funded wildlife bridge over Oracle Road). The cost is estimated to be \$10 million.
 - The Town of Marana is currently in discussions with Arizona State Land Department to end its 99-year lease on the 2400-acre Tortolita Preserve, which will necessitate purchase if it is to continue to function as a preserve. This land serves as an important anchor in protecting the wildlife linkage between the Tortolita and Tucson mountain ranges.

2. Private lands that are, or most likely will be, available for purchase in the next 10-15 years include:
 - Marley Ranch (Phase I has been acquired. Remainder available, with county option to purchase. Currently valued at \$65.8 million).
 - A 540-acre parcel which if acquired, would preserve the "I-19 / Santa Cruz River Corridor Critical Wildlife Linkage," connecting Marley Ranch to the Santa Rita mountain range (valued at approximately \$5 million).
 - Painted Hills (currently available for approximately \$10 million).
 - Rosemont Ranch (approximately 21,000 acres could be eligible for purchase or lease if the proposed Rosemont mine fails. This was offered to the county in 2004 at \$11 million).
 - Kelly Ranch (valued at \$5 million in 2004. The development proposal for this property was officially withdrawn in January 2014, making purchase a possibility).
 - Saguaro National Park expansion, East and West units.

In Pima County's recent bond survey, residents chose habitat and community open space as the *top priorities* for bond funding in the Historic, Cultural, and Natural Area Conservation category. It is evident that the purchase and preservation of these critical areas continues to be what the public values. Additionally, the delay in bond elections due to economic factors has postponed much needed purchases that would contribute to the SDCP's biological goals.

Thank you for your time and consideration of these comments. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Christina McVie
Board Chair

Future Pima County Bond Election Proposed Project

Project Name: Habitat Protection Priorities & Associated Lands

Location: Numerous eligible properties throughout eastern Pima County (map available).

Scope: Purchase for conservation as many of the eligible properties within this category as possible with the funds available. The Habitat Protection Priorities were developed in 2003 in order to identify the most biologically important lands to protect first under Pima County's Multi-Species Conservation Plan and Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. The Habitat Protection Priorities were updated in 2006 to reflect information not available in 2003, and to delete properties that were purchased by Pima County and to delete properties that were developed since 2003. The lands identified as Habitat Protection Priorities include a wide range of invaluable natural areas critical to the survival of numerous vulnerable plants and animals in Pima County, and critical to the protection of water quality and flood prevention for residents of Pima County. The types of properties range from large working ranches containing high quality semi-desert grasslands, to small properties containing important riparian areas.

NOT ALL ELIGIBLE PROPERTIES WILL BE ACQUIRED: The number of properties within the Habitat Protection Priorities is in excess of the number that can be purchased with the proposed bond fund allocation. Pima County acquired 47,000 acres within these Habitat Protection Priorities with 2004 bond funds. The future bond program will enable Pima County to continue efforts to acquire more of these invaluable natural areas.

Benefits: Acquiring these properties will expand Pima County's reserve of natural open spaces, protecting scenic views, recreational opportunities, biological and cultural resources, and natural floodplain functions. In addition, Pima County is applying for an incidental take permit under Section 10(1)(a)(B) of the federal Endangered Species Act. Under this permit, conserving these natural areas will ensure that public and private development projects can continue in areas suitable for development. The County's reserve system is an integral part of our local economy. One of the most important industries in Arizona is tourism. According to the Arizona Office of Tourism, the primary activity for a majority of travelers to Arizona included nature-based outdoor activities. Moreover, in a visitor survey conducted by Visit Tucson, it was found that the surrounding natural environment and outdoor/desert activities were cited by visitors as Tucson's greatest attractions.

Costs: \$2.6 billion

Bond Funding: \$110,000,000

Other Funding: Federal and State Grants

Fiscal Year Project Start and Finish Date: TBD

Project Management Jurisdiction: Pima County

Future Operating and Maintenance Costs: Based on the average cost to operate and maintain the existing natural open space parks system of Pima County, it is anticipated that future operations and maintenance will cost approximately \$7 per year per acre of added natural open space.

Regional Benefits: The eligible properties are located throughout eastern Pima County and within other jurisdictions.

Supervisor District of Project Location: ALL

Requestor: County Administrator's Office – Conservation Bond Program

Date: 3.5.14

Future Pima County Bond Election Proposed Project

Project Name: Community Open Space

Location: Numerous eligible properties throughout eastern Pima County

Scope: Purchase for conservation as many of the eligible properties within this category as possible with the funds available. Many of the eligible properties were proposed for conservation by members of the public, conservation organizations, or neighborhood associations. The following property areas are eligible, and will be further defined by parcel code and map:

- A-Mountain
- Camino de Oeste
- Catalina State Park Expansion (State Trust land)
- Catalina Conservation Easements
- Colossal Cave Mountain Park Expansion (State Trust land and private land)
- Dos Picos
- Double XX Ranch
- Gerlich Property
- Green Valley West Desert Preserve
- Kelly Ranch
- Los Morteros
- Loving J Ranch Santa Cruz
- Mt. Lemmon
- Northern Altar Valley
- Painted Hills
- Rosemont Ranch
- Sabino Canyon
- Saguaro National Park East Expansion
- Saguaro National Park West Expansion
- Tortolita Mountain Park Expansion (State Trust land)
- Tucson Mountain Park Expansion (State Trust land)
- Tumamoc Hill (State Trust land)

NOT ALL ELIGIBLE PROPERTIES WILL BE ACQUIRED: The number of Community Open Space properties identified is in excess of the number that can be purchased with the proposed bond fund allocation. This provides the necessary flexibility during the property acquisition process.

Benefits: Acquiring these properties will expand Pima County's reserve of natural open spaces, protecting scenic views, recreational opportunities, biological and cultural resources, and natural floodplain functions. In addition, Pima County is applying for an incidental take permit under Section 10(1)(a)(B) of the federal Endangered Species Act. Under this permit, conserving these natural areas will ensure that public and private development projects can continue in areas suitable for development. The County's reserve system is an integral part of our local economy. One of the most important industries in Arizona is tourism. According to the Arizona Office of Tourism, the primary activity for a majority of travelers to Arizona included nature-based outdoor activities. Moreover, in a visitor survey conducted by Visit Tucson, it was found that the surrounding natural environment and outdoor/desert activities were cited by visitors as Tucson's greatest attractions.

