

# Friends of the Desert

Issue 56 Fall 2019

## A Strong Voice for the People and Wildlife of the Sonoran Desert

Photo: Bob Wick-BLM-CC Flickr

## Proposed I-11 Route Faces Overwhelming Opposition

### *Southern Arizona community says a clear NO to Interstate 11 route in Avra Valley*

For many years, local community organizations and government agencies in Pima County, Arizona, have been aware of state and federal plans to accommodate increased traffic flow on Interstate 10, which currently runs directly through downtown Tucson. One idea that has been floated in various forms is to build a brand new freeway west of the Tucson Mountains to “bypass” Interstate 10.

This proposed freeway, now called Interstate 11, is objectionable on many levels, the most significant being that a freeway west of the Tucson Mountains would have to be built directly adjacent to Saguaro National Park and Ironwood Forest National Monument.

In addition to these iconic federal parks, there are other protected open spaces that would be negatively impacted. These lands include Pima

County-owned Tucson Mountain Park, the Tucson Mitigation Corridor owned by the Bureau of Reclamation and managed by Pima County, open space properties purchased and protected under the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, and tribal lands owned by the Pascua-Yaqui Nation and the Tohono O’odham Nation. **To put it simply, Interstate 11 would be a disaster for the Sonoran Desert.**

**Thank you for joining us in this important fight on behalf of the people and wildlife of the Sonoran Desert!**

Throughout the fall of 2018, community partners knew that federal agencies were working on a Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for the “Tier 1” level of review of Interstate 11. Maps of various route alternatives had been circulated in prior years, with possible routes — two west of the Tucson Mountains or co-located with Interstate 10 — being the final three under consideration.

*continued inside*

## What Can You Do to Help?

**#1: Write a Letter to the Editor.** There has been a steady drumbeat of opposition to the proposed I-11 route in the Opinion section of the *Arizona Daily Star* and other local papers and we want that to continue —please submit a letter today!



## Carolyn's Corner

# Protecting Water for People and the Environment

## *Community Water Coalition of Southern Arizona fights for sustainable water policies*

**The Coalition works to create a community where: ecosystem health is protected; nature and healthy wild animal populations are valued; and residents, visitors, and future generations can all drink clean water, breathe clean air, and find wild places to roam.**

### Coalition Member Groups

- Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest
- Arizona Native Plant Society
- Bat Conservation International
- Cascabel Conservation Association
- Center for Biological Diversity
- Center for Environmental Ethics
- Defenders of Wildlife
- Desert Watch
- 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
- Genius Loci Foundation
- Native Seeds / SEARCH
- Protect Land and Neighborhoods
- Safford Peak Watershed Education Team
- Save the Scenic Santa Ritas
- Sierra Club – Grand Canyon Chapter
- Sierra Club – Rincon Group
- Sky Island Alliance
- Society for Ecological Restoration
- Southwestern Biological Institute
- Tortolita Homeowners Association
- Tucson Audubon Society
- Tucson Herpetological Society
- Tucson Mountains Association
- Wildlands Network

For two decades, the Coalition has been working on habitat protection, open space acquisition, and wildlife connectivity. Throughout these years, people have consistently asked us, “**But what are you doing about water?**” It is a good question since water is a resource that is getting more and more scarce in the desert.

While water needs for protected open space are far less than for residential subdivisions and commercial development, what are we *actively* doing to protect our precious water supply in the region? Thank you, as one of our supporters, for pushing and challenging us on this issue. You are right — conservation groups need to be out front protecting water for the environment.

As we have worked on various water challenges over the years, we realized that to address this issue effectively, it would need to have a focused organization working on it full-time, as we had been doing for many years with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. Fortunately, and not coincidentally, other environmental groups in the community had similar thoughts. And so was born the Community Water Coalition of Southern Arizona (CWC–SoAZ) in 2014.

### Conservation groups need to be out front protecting water for the environment.

As a founding member, we have been an integral part of this group for over 5 years, working toward sustainable water policies throughout the region and sometimes “wading into” laws and regulations of the state and federal governments. The mission

of the CWC–SoAZ is to “promote water conservation, river and riparian area protection and environmental justice through policy development, education and advocacy, [working] via multicultural and intersectional collaborative endeavors in Southern Arizona and the U.S./Mexico border region.”

The CWC–SoAZ works on many issues, including: helping to change Arizona rules that give “credit” to keep water in the river; continuing to support state legislation that recognizes water for the environment as a recognized and worthy goal; opposing changes to the federal Clean Water Rule; and defending the City of Tucson’s Water Service Area policy to serve water only to Tucson residents.

We at the Coalition are proud to be actively working to protect water for people *and* the environment. While the CWC–SoAZ is nearing a decade of work, there is much more that needs to be done. A quote that comes to mind that fits with both our Coalition and CWC–SoAZ:

*“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” – Margaret Mead*

Thank you for supporting our involvement on so many issues of importance to the Sonoran Desert!

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The Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection is an independent, nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization. Contributions to the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection are tax-deductible to the extent permitted by law. Our EIN # is 82-2156664.



Hazy sunshine washes over a saguaro forest near the Tucson Mountains and the proposed Interstate 11 route. Photo courtesy Frank Staub

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# What Can You Do to Help?

**#2: Write to U.S. Senators Kyrsten Sinema and Martha McSally, your U.S. representative, your state senator and representatives, and Governor Ducey to express your opposition to the proposed I-11 route. Contact information for all of these elected officials can be found on our I-11 webpage at: <https://bit.ly/2KsnZHS>.**

## Proposed I-11 Route Faces Overwhelming Opposition cover story continued

The Tier 1 DEIS was finally released on April 5, 2019, and the Recommended Alternative route was as we feared — at the doorstep of some of our most treasured and valuable public lands in Southern Arizona.

Throughout April, May, June, and early July 2019, with your support we worked with our member groups, partners on the I-11 Joint Stakeholder Community Planning Group, and concerned community members to execute a coordinated, community-based response to this DEIS. Two public meetings were held in the Tucson region to gather public comments on the DEIS. **Over 200 people attended the May 8 public meeting at the Tucson Convention Center, with 85 giving verbal comments. And over 350 people attended the May 11 public meeting in Marana, with over 100 people giving verbal comments.**

We held multiple comment-writing workshops — in midtown Tucson, downtown Tucson, and Picture Rocks. And in early June, we sent out over 13,000 postcards to property owners along the proposed route to inform them of the proposal and their opportunity to comment on it. On July 4, 2019, we submitted our official comments on the Tier 1 DEIS, representing

our 30 member groups and including 27 individual signatories from our member groups and partner organizations. Twenty-one Letters to the Editor have been published in the AZ Daily Star to date opposing the I-11 route and we know of many more that were submitted and not published — thank you to everyone who submitted letters! Twenty-four news stories were published both in print, online, and on TV about the public comment period and the widespread community opposition to this proposal.

**What's next?** Now that the Tier 1 DEIS comment period has concluded, the Arizona Department of Transportation and Federal Highways Administration will be reviewing and analyzing all the public comments they received. According to the timelines on the official I-11 website ([i11study.com/Arizona](http://i11study.com/Arizona)), a Final Tier EIS will be released sometime in 2020.

Thank you for continuing to use your voice and all the available avenues to pressure ADOT and FHWA to make the right choice and abandon the Recommended Alternative route in Avra Valley. **And thank you for joining us in this important fight on behalf of the people and wildlife of the Sonoran Desert!**

## Thank You to ALL Our Volunteers!

The Coalition's volunteers are THE BEST. They monitor our wildlife cameras out in the field, sort wildlife camera photos in our office, conduct roadkill surveys, educate local children with our Critter Cam program, stuff envelopes, clean up our adopted stretch of Oracle Road, and more! Please welcome the following volunteers who have joined our volunteer corps in 2019: **Althea Weeks, Mike Miller, Caleb Pocock, and Jane "Middy" Henke.**



Volunteer Desert Monitor Henry Miller checks a wildlife camera in the Oro Valley area.

# Impact Briefs

## Rosemont Mine

On July 31, 2019, Judge James Soto halted construction of the Rosemont Mine, overturning the U.S. Forest Service's 2017 decision to approve the mine. Judge Soto's decision was in response to one of five lawsuits filed by four environmental groups and two tribes. We applaud and thank all of these groups and tribes for their tenacious opposition to this mine. **And thank YOU for your support of our work opposing this project. We will continue to do so for as long as it takes to defeat this mine once and for all.**

## Habitat Conservation Planning in Pima County

In July 2019, as part of the continued implementation of their Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan (MSCP), Pima County released a new Aquatic Species Management Plan. To develop this plan, Pima County inventoried local streams, stock tanks, springs, and large ponds in order to identify sites where vulnerable aquatic wildlife species can be released. For example, 15 sites were identified for possible release of the Gila topminnow and 14 possible sites for the Huachuca water umbel. Head to our webpage ([sonorandesert.org](http://sonorandesert.org)) to learn more. **And thank you for supporting vulnerable wildlife species and robust habitat conservation planning in Pima County!**

### Get the Latest Updates!



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Jessica Moreno, CSDP Conservation Science Director, and Scott Wilbor of Sky Island Alliance, assess a culvert under I-10 East as part of a preliminary data-gathering effort completed in 2017. Thank you for supporting our new project focusing on the protection of this wildlife linkage!

## Protecting Safe Passages for Wildlife on I-10 East

### Community science volunteers start monitoring the Rincon–Santa Rita–Whetstone Mountains Wildlife Linkage east of Tucson

Southern Arizona is full of important — and threatened — wildlife linkages and we've set our sights on improving another one. East of Tucson, Interstate 10 divides the regionally important Rincon– Santa Rita–Whetstone Mountains Wildlife Linkage. **This linkage is one of the few remaining north–south wildlife crossing points found between Tucson and New Mexico and it encompasses several protected areas and important waters, including Davidson Canyon and Cienega Creek.** This makes this wildlife linkage critically important for desert wildlife in the face of climate change.

In the spring of 2017, the Coalition and our partners conducted comprehensive assessments and wildlife surveys of the nearly 80 existing underpasses and drainage culverts in the study area. Our results indicate that this wildlife linkage could be made safer for wildlife and motorists by: 1) installing wildlife funnel-fencing to keep animals off the highway and to direct wildlife toward existing crossing points; 2) retrofitting and widening existing drainage culverts located in high volume areas; and 3) building an additional wildlife crossing between Cienega Creek and Marsh Station Rd Exit 291.

**Protecting this wildlife linkage is critically important for desert wildlife in the face of climate change.**

Now, with the help of our volunteers, we plan to use wildlife camera monitoring and roadkill surveys to gather data on wildlife passage rates and roadkill hotspots along a 20-mile stretch of I-10 in this area. Preliminary results, including one black bear mortality, have helped us begin to identify good locations for wildlife funnel-fencing installation, existing culvert retrofits, and new wildlife crossing structures. This data will inform State and County highway and wildlife officials on where to focus mitigation efforts to improve highway safety and minimize wildlife-vehicle collisions.

In July 2019, the Coalition was awarded an Arizona Game and Fish Department Heritage Grant to buy new supplies for this project and get it off the ground. We've already assembled our new crew of "Desert Roadies" that will be conducting roadkill surveys and our "Desert Monitors" that will be monitoring new wildlife cameras. **Thank you for all your support of our wildlife linkages protection work — we'll be sharing more about this project as data comes in!**

