

Friends of the Desert

Issue 66 Spring 2025

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

Interstate 11 project slowed by lawsuit

Federal Highway Administration agrees to refresh its environmental review, giving the public another chance to comment

In January 2025, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) agreed to re-evaluate their Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement on the proposed Interstate 11. ADOT also agreed to hold a 60-day public comment period.

This is the latest in the ongoing lawsuit we brought against the FHWA in 2021 with our partners

Center for Biological Diversity, Tucson Audubon Society, and Friends of Ironwood Forest. **While this is a victory, we must remain vigilant.** As a best-case outcome, the re-evaluation may result in a new decision about the project. There is no guarantee, though, that the FHWA will abandon the proposed 'West Option' through the Altar and Avra valleys.

We urge you to use your voice to oppose the I-11 West Option. You can help by staying informed and watching for our updates — while we don't yet have more detail on timing, we will let you know when the public comment period opens.

Thank you for standing by us in this fight for 13 years!

Talking Points Refresher

- * **Cost and length.** The East Option is proposed to co-locate the I-11 with I-19 and I-10 through Tucson, and is cheaper, shorter, and has the support of our local jurisdictions such as Pima County and the City of Tucson — who oppose the West Option.
- * **Environmental damage.** The West Option would damage natural resources and degrade the visitor experience on public lands. Shockingly, it is proposed within just a few hundred feet of Ironwood Forest National Monument and Saguaro National Park.
- * **Threats to protected species,** including the threatened cactus ferruginous pygmy owl and the endangered Pima pineapple cactus.
- * **Irreversible impact.** The Bureau of Reclamation's Tucson Mitigation Corridor was created to offset impacts from the CAP canal, which interrupts existing wildlife corridors. If the interstate cuts through this mitigation land, animals will have nowhere else to go.
- * **Wildlife corridors.** Wildlife already struggles with existing roadways such as Interstate 10. Species such as desert bighorn sheep, especially, need to be able to roam freely.
- * **Community displacement.** Many people live or maintain working landscapes along the West Route. Homes and properties could be forcibly condemned.



Hohokam petroglyphs in Ironwood Forest National Monument. Photo by Frank Staub.

Above: Cactus ferruginous pygmy owl. Photo by Aaron Flesch.

The Coalition's mission is to protect the biodiversity of the Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona through science-based advocacy, education, and collaboration.

We are grateful for the opportunity to live and work on traditionally Native lands, including those belonging to the O'odham, Tohono O'odham, and Pascua Yaqui.

Coalition Member Groups

Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest
Arizona Master Naturalist Association
Arizona Native Plant Society
Bat Conservation International
Cascabel Conservation Association
Center for Biological Diversity
Center for Environmental Ethics
DarkSky Southern Arizona
Defenders of Wildlife
Desert Watch
Environmental Law Society
Friends of Ironwood Forest
Friends of Madera Canyon
Friends of Saguaro National Park
Friends of Tortolita
Gates Pass Area Neighborhood Association
Genius Loci Foundation
Great Old Broads for Wilderness – Tucson
Living Desert Alliance
Native Seeds / SEARCH
Protect Land and Neighborhoods
Save the Scenic Santa Ritas
Sierra Club, *Grand Canyon Chapter*
Sierra Club, *Nopales Group*
Sky Island Alliance
Tortolita Alliance
Tortolita Homeowners Association
Tucson Audubon Society
Tucson Herpetological Society
Tucson Mountains Association
Wildlands Network

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.

Desert Updates

Time to double down on local impact

What a lot has happened in our first six months of leadership! With our funding, we have always sought to build community and a sense of ownership while maintaining an independent voice — this means that we work with individual donors instead of public funders. So far, only around 2% of our income has been impacted by the federal funding freezes. That cannot be said for the broader ecosystem of those who protect and steward the Sonoran Desert. As a result, our work here in southern Arizona is ramping up and we need your support now more than ever.

Coming up, we have many opportunities to invest in lasting and local progress. Long-term planning tools are at the core of our work and we are actively contributing to several 10, 20 and 30 year regional plans, as well as code updates, that are in draft or being finalized in 2025. At the same time, we're fighting against harmful development, educating policymakers, and drafting our next strategic plan.

In our Spring 2020 newsletter to you, we voiced surprise at how crucial transportation planning had become to our work. Now, five years later, road ecology continues to be a critical tool that helps us reconnect open spaces. With roadways widening and proposals such as Interstate 11 still on the horizon, this work continues to be urgent. Our new roadkill study and new wildlife camera focus areas will continue to strengthen our case for wildlife crossings and safer roads.

The Coalition ended 2024 with our most generous giving season yet. This was a great honor and we thank you for continuing to invest locally. Your support right now will help us advance, and also safeguard, several generations of work to conserve the Sonoran Desert and its biodiversity.

For the desert,



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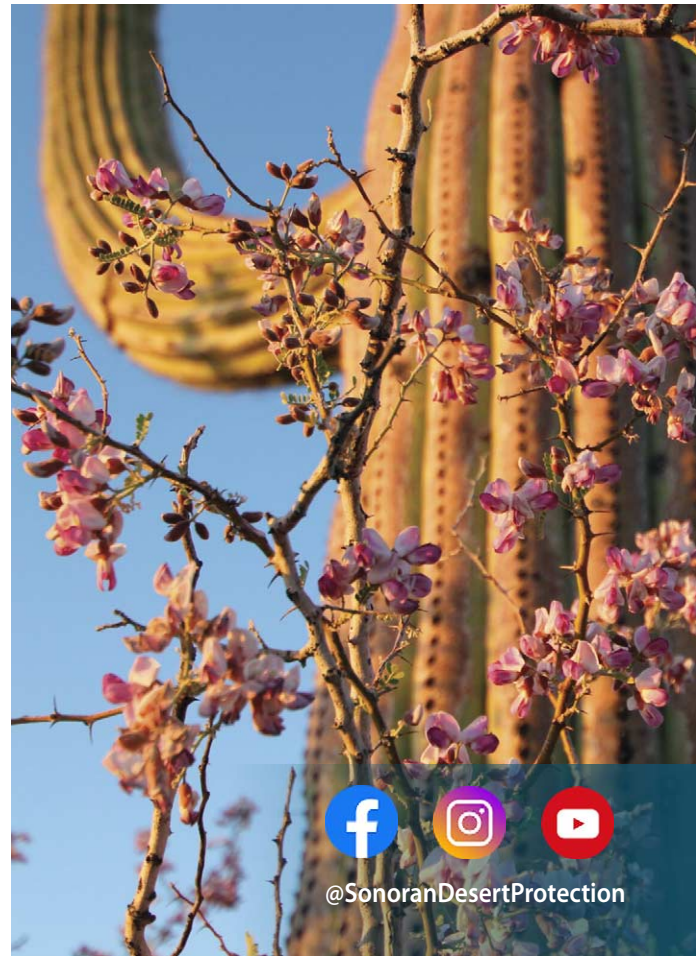
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An ironwood tree in bloom by a saguaro.
Photo by Friends of Ironwood Forest
National Monument.



@SonoranDesertProtection



Community members rally for full funding of wildlife crossings in the RTA Next draft plan at the Oracle Road wildlife bridge, seen in the background. Photo credit: Leslie Epperson.

Regional funding for wildlife crossings

An update on the RTA Next draft and your participation!

We asked you to speak up and you responded! This winter, nearly 150 people — over seven times the responses for any other project — told the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) that continued funding for wildlife crossings is important to them. We are so grateful!

In 2006, we established that \$100 million was needed for critical wildlife crossings in Pima County. Only around a quarter of that has been allocated in the current RTA Plan, which funded our Oracle Road crossings. And late last year, the budget for wildlife linkages in the draft RTA Next plan was also slashed in half, from \$50 million to \$25 million.

Many projects that were identified back in 2006 are still unfunded, including crossings to reconnect the Tucson and Tortolita Mountains — part of our region’s most critical wildlife linkage.

Like many of our initiatives, this is long-term work. Planning for RTA Next began in 2018, and we spent over five years advising on its draft as part of the Citizens’ Advisory Committee. If approved by the RTA board, the plan and its half-cent sales tax will go to vote this November. We will then advocate for priority projects and post-construction monitoring of crossing sites to ensure their success. Thank you for being part of this effort!

The Sonoran Desert can't wait another 20 years!

In crossing news

It's roadkill survey season!

This spring, we are launching a seasonal Wildlife Road Watch roadkill monitoring study to fill gaps in data that we need to advocate for potential crossing projects, including a wildlife bridge at I-10 near Avra Valley Road. Roadkill can show us where animals are attempting to cross roads and where collision risk is high for our motorists. Along with other data, roadkill surveys help to determine where crossings are most needed. Changes in roadkill data can also be used to show that our crossing solutions work! Contact us to participate in this work.



Camera program milestone

We have reached a momentous milestone with our camera program! This spring, we are officially wrapping up our 13 year-long Oro Valley project, which is the longest-running wildlife camera program in southern Arizona, to focus on the future wildlife bridge project across I-10. Stay tuned for our final report!

NEW! Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp

Construction is currently underway on the Santa Cruz River Wildlife Ramp, the region’s first custom-built ramp to allow animals to move safely in and out of waterways with steep levees. During recent workshops and public consultation with the Pima County Regional Flood Control District on their draft 5-year Floodplain Management Plan, we suggested a working group to research more wildlife ramp options—now a part of the approved plan. These ramps improve landscape connectivity without removing the safety functions of structures like levees!

Desert Fence Busters success!

The Desert Fence Busters works to improve wildlife movement between natural areas by removing obsolete barbed wire fences. Since 2021, we have worked with the Desert Fence Busters to remove 65.3 miles of fencing—enough to circle the City of Tucson!

In 2024 alone, the Desert Fence Busters:

- * Removed 28.8 miles of barbed wire fence weighing ~15 tons
- * Collaborated with Tucson Audubon to cap 364 “death-pipes”
- * Worked with 339 volunteers across 11 work days, logging 1,886 hours
- * Improved wildlife movement within the Coyote–Ironwood–Tucson Linkage

Maintaining safe passages

Erosion control at the Oracle Road wildlife underpass

Since mid-2023, we have worked with our dedicated volunteers and partners to re-establish habitat at the Oracle Road wildlife crossings.

In January, we collaborated with Pima County to address ongoing erosion issues at the wildlife underpass. At our workshop, volunteers learned how to build rock structures such as 'media lunas' and 'one rock dams' to redirect or reduce the speed of flowing water. In March, volunteers applied these techniques to reduce erosion east of the wildlife underpass.

These crossings were voter-approved and funded, and we care that they are maintained and remain useful for years to come. Erosion is a natural process but, when concentrated in one area, it can damage ecosystems and make our crossings less welcoming to wildlife. In extreme cases, erosion can even undermine a structure's integrity! **This maintenance work is just another way we are helping to connect our landscape.**

This project is funded in part by the Santa Cruz Valley National Heritage Area, Thank you to Strategic Habitat Enhancements for their partnership on this project!



Get involved: Invest locally

- * **Stay informed.** Sign up for our emails and action alerts
- * **Speak up.** Write to your representatives, or respond to public comment periods
- * **Show up.** Attend public meetings and events
- * **Volunteer.** Get to know your community and landscape
- * **Donate!** Support the Coalition and those driving local change



Welcome newest Coalition members!

DarkSky Southern Arizona. The local chapter of DarkSky International focuses on the protection of our local communities, wildlife, and astronomical activities from the harmful effects of light pollution through outreach, advocacy, and conservation. Together, we continue to advocate for an improved Outdoor Lighting Code that will help to address light pollution in Pima County and the City of Tucson.



Living Desert Alliance. The Living Desert Alliance focuses on community support and involvement and aligns with the Coalition particularly on issues related to thoughtful growth. They broadcast the work of others and seek to protect the interests of and provide a voice for all Pima County communities, including marginalized citizens, desert plants and animals.

