

## Questions abound on BOR land purchase

By Greg Jones  
Staff Writer

Officials in Graham County want more time to look at the Bureau of Reclamation's proposal to purchase land between Fort Thomas and Eden.

Drew John, chairman of the Graham County Board of Supervisors, said the county received a scoping letter Feb. 1 from the bureau announcing its intention to purchase up to 700 acres of land along the Gila River. The problem was that the comment period during the scoping process ended Feb. 8, just seven days after the county learned of the proposal.

"We sent a letter that said if they would like support from the board of supervisors, they should extend the comment period," John said. "We had some difficulty with it because we weren't sure what kind of luggage was going to come along with it and felt it needed to be reopened for public comment."

Comments from the public are elicited during the scoping period so agencies know what issues to address in the environmental assessment they are required to prepare.

Graham County Manager Terry Cooper said if the bureau wanted more significant comment, he believed they would extend the comment period.

"They said they wanted specifics, but due to the short time frame, our comments were fairly general in nature," Cooper said.

The BOR is proposing to purchase the land to meet its obligations to mitigate the effects the Roosevelt Dam will have

on the Southwestern willow flycatcher.

The Salt River Project (SRP) will manage the land, pursuant to the obligations it incurred in the Roosevelt Habitat Conservation Plan of 2002. The conservation plan directs SRP to purchase land to also mitigate effects of the dam on flycatcher habitat.

"Reclamation and SRP are combining efforts to fulfill our respective land acquisition and management requirements through this proposal," the scoping letter said.

John offered a slightly different explanation.

"The reason they're doing it, and correct me if I'm wrong, the flycatchers don't know how to get out of the water," he said. "When Roosevelt Lake comes up, it's going to take habitat that's there. For them to satisfy the habitat for those birds, they had to buy some property somewhere else, and they felt this area over there wasn't being used for anything."

"That's a matter of opinion."

Nicole Olsker with the bureau's Environmental Resource Management Division said the Gila River offers "great riparian habitat" for the flycatcher.

"We're primarily proposing purchasing it because the willow flycatchers have been using salt cedar for nesting habitat," she said.

That reason concerns Cooper.

"It's the board's belief that to be good stewards of the river we need to deal with phreatophytes to make the water better in terms of quality and quantity," he said. "With the water litigation, there

are water quality standards, and we need to do something with the salt cedar in the river bottom, and this goes 180 degrees against that."

Plans to eradicate the salt cedar from the banks of the Gila River would be stifled if a 700-acre plot of land served as sanctuary, not only for the endangered birds, but for the invasive trees.

"It keeps it going; it keeps the salt cedar going," John said.

He is not sure that any problems will come from the purchase, but with little time to comment on the plan, he said the board just doesn't know what to expect.

"We're not saying any of this is going to happen," John said. "We just want to be sure that this won't affect the private land owners."

John said because the purchase involves private parties and prices have already been set, it may be difficult to stop the transaction.

If the transaction can't be stopped, Cooper said the county is looking at making the most of it.

"We certainly don't have it verified yet, but we would hope we could see that as a credit in conjunction with the Eighth Avenue Bridge," he said.

Olsker said she didn't know what impacts the purchase will have, but they will be addressed in a draft environmental assessment to be released in March.

The Gila Valley Irrigation District was contacted but declined to comment.

To receive a copy of the environmental assessment call Roth Konst at 602-216-3864 or write to Bruce Ellis, Chief of the BOR Environmental Resource Management Division, at the Phoenix Area Office, P.O. Box 81169, Phoenix, 85069-1169.

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