

Expansion of Fort Huachuca can only hurt San Pedro River

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TUCSON

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has abandoned its mission of protecting fish and wildlife along Arizona's last wild desert river, the San Pedro.

In a biological opinion issued June 15, the Fish and Wildlife Service said Fort Huachuca's water conservation efforts have been so successful that the fort should be allowed to grow by 3,000 personnel - even though the river is shrinking because of growth linked to the fort.

The conservation community applauds Fort Huachuca's conservation success, but we are shocked at the political science used by the Fish and Wildlife Service in allowing the fort to expand. San Pedro River stream flow continues to decline as excessive, inadequately mitigated, fort-related growth increases the groundwater pumping deficit.

Indeed, since 2005 the San Pedro has twice gone dry in places where it has always flowed.

So, if the river is even worse off, how could the Fish and Wildlife Service conclude that the fort has made it better off?

The answer is two-fold. No. 1 is a legislative loophole given to the Fish and Wildlife Service by Rep. Rick Renzi, R-Ariz., who is facing corruption charges linked to a San Pedro River-area land swap. No. 2 is a faulty accounting scheme used to underestimate the fort's impact.

In 2003, Renzi, who doesn't represent the river area but whose business partner has large financial ties to it, pushed through a legislative rider that exempts the fort from responsibility for harm to the river caused by excessive growth. As a result, the Fish and Wildlife Service can no longer take in account the deteriorating health of the river when evaluating fort expansion, which through the multiplier effect of family members and service support could be many times the 3,000 allowed by the Fish and Wildlife Service.

There's no question that Sierra Vista itself would mostly disappear without the fort's \$800 million-plus annual local expenditures. Likewise, it will surely grow in proportion to the fort's expansion - thanks to the Renzi rider.

Here is what the Fish and Wildlife Service should have considered when assessing the fort's biological impact:

The river has lost two-thirds of its historic flow since the fort and its surrounding communities began expanding.

Despite admirable on-post conservation efforts, the river has continued to decline.

Conservation alone will not save the river.

Excessive, unmitigated, groundwater-dependent growth is the culprit, on the fort and off.

We understand how the Renzi rider limits the scope of the Fish and Wildlife Service's evaluation, but we can't help being repulsed by its exuberant embrace of those limits. The Fish and Wildlife Service is the only federal agency whose sole mission is protecting fish and wildlife. We should think such an agency would lament how politics have prevented it from performing those duties.

Instead, with respect to the San Pedro River, the Fish and Wildlife Service has abandoned its mission "to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people."

As for the fort, we applaud its role in protecting our country and we acknowledge its fine on-post conservation efforts. But we are

worried that, inspired by Fish and Wildlife Service's flawed decision, the fort may now start growing again.

We believe that Fort Huachuca can become a true friend of the San Pedro, without compromising its military mission. We urge the fort to resist the trap created by Congressman Renzi's rider. Expansion can only hurt the river.

We call on our congressional representatives to kill the Renzi rider, which is turning our regulators into political co-conspirators.

What's at stake here is the last, free-flowing desert river in the Southwest.

The writer is executive director of the Center for Biological Diversity.