

Verde River listed among nation's 10 most endangered rivers

By ARTHUR H. ROTSTEIN
The Associated Press

TUCSON (AP) - A conservation organization has listed the Verde River as the nation's 10th most endangered river this year, saying a planned pipeline to feed groundwater to the Prescott area threatens its future.

The Big Chino Water Ranch project, a 30-mile pipeline planned to carry water pumped from the Big Chino aquifer to fast-growing Prescott and Prescott Valley, will dramatically draw down the aquifer and the Verde River into which it flows, according to the latest annual report from American Rivers released Wednesday.

In doing so, environmentalists contend that it will affect wildlife, including a bald eagle nesting site, that it will eventually dry up the year-round flow in the river's first two dozen miles and that it will decrease water flows into Horseshoe and Bartlett dams, which belong to the city of Phoenix and the Salt River Project, by 5 to 10 percent a year.

The Big Chino aquifer provides more than 80 percent of the base flow into the upper Verde River - flow from springs during the driest times of the year, when there is no mountain runoff.

The city of Prescott and town of Prescott Valley, which have seen dramatic development in the last decade, together purchased the JWK Ranch in December 2004 for its water rights, with the intent of building a pipeline.

Central Arizona's municipal water use has grown by nearly 40 percent in the last eight years, and population in the Verde watershed is expected to more than double within the next half-century, American Rivers said.

The renamed Big Chino Ranch, 40 miles north and west of Prescott, consists of more than 4,575 acres of deeded lands and nearly 1,950 acres of Arizona state lands.

Since 1986, American Rivers has issued an annual report of the country's most endangered rivers, highlighting those waterways that face

the most uncertain futures.

American Rivers, the Sierra Club's Grand Canyon chapter and the Center for Biological Diversity urged Prescott, Prescott Valley and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to perform a thorough review of the project and have the federal agency produce an environmental impact statement before any construction begins.

"Arizona law might not recognize the reality that water pumped out of the ground can't wind up in the river, but reality has a way of winning the argument in the end," Rebecca Wodder, American Rivers' president, said in a statement issued in Washington.

"If that happens, downstream communities like the tiny town of Perkinsville as well as the city of Phoenix that depend on good water in the Verde River will lose."

Jim Holt, manager of the Big Chino Ranch project in Prescott, was out of his office Tuesday and did not return numerous calls from The As-

sociated Press.

“The Army Corps should request consultation with Fish and Wildlife for an environmental impact statement because of the reduction in base flow of the Verde River and impacts to native fish and wildlife,” said Michelle Harrington, the Center for Biological Diversity’s river program director.

“So far the city is pretty much denying that there are going to be any impacts.”

Harrington said city officials have said that it will provide mitigation if needed, but for now is talking only about putting in monitoring wells.

Harrington said conservationists believe the project will have to request Army Corps of Engineer permits because the pipeline will be crossing several washes; as a result, the Army Corps should seek consultation with Fish and Wildlife for an environmental impact statement because the Endangered Species Act would come into play, she said.

However, Arizona law does not recognize a distinction between surface water and groundwater, and does not make a connection between the impact of water-pumping several miles from a river, so it’s unlikely that either Phoenix or the Salt River Project would have legal recourse to the pipeline.

Harrington listed three possible steps to mitigate the impact, but each would pose problems, she said.