

CBD announces campaign to save the Verde River

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The Center for Biological Diversity has a reputation as a mouse that roars and in some instances, bites.

Started in 1989, the Center has been an advocate for over 300 species of plants and animals in the United States and internationally. It has also protected over 43 million acres of habitat.

It has done so through a combination of diligence, science and a rabidly successful legal arm that has shown little intimidation against opponents exponentially larger in size. Over the years the little organization has taken on businesses, entire industries and the federal government.

Through all its courtroom battles, the Center has achieved a 90 percent success rate.

Now the Center has announced it will begin a full court press to save what it sees as the last truly functional river in Arizona the Verde.

Although active in monitoring the progress of Prescott and Prescott Valley's attempt to construct a pipeline and begin pumping water from the Big Chino Aquifer, the source of the river's headwaters, the organization has yet to mount a public campaign.

That came to an end on August 15 when the Center announced its Save the Verde campaign.

According to campaign organizer, Rivers Program Director Michelle Harrington, the Center has made a commitment to educating the public about what it sees as a major threat to the river's health.

"We have been active since the late 1990's, monitoring development in the area and the pipeline project. But with the additional development pressures taking place in the upper and middle Verde, we really have decided to make this a major campaign.

"What we haven't been able to do in the past is get on the ground and talk to people. Now we have two people on the ground in Prescott, working public events and doing some grassroots citizen education," said Harrington.

She also said the Center is planning to organize letter-writing campaigns to local, state and federal officials involved in the pipeline plan, along with newspapers.

They have also begun a Web site, www.savetheverde.org, on which they have posted the text of numerous studies, statements and other information, along with a calendar of planned activities.

Along with the new educational campaign, the Center is still involved in its legal challenges.

The Center filed a notice of intent to sue in December 1994 just two days after the City of Prescott committed to buying the JWK Ranch. The ranch, located atop the Big Chino aquifer, came with water rights for over 8,000 acre-feet per year of groundwater.

In the notice, the Center states that it is their belief that removing that much water from the Big Chino Aquifer would have an adverse affect on flows to the Verde River and eventually endanger already endangered species in the upper reaches of the river.

"Our campaign will center on the Prescott Pipeline. We are concerned with how they plan to mitigate the effects of their pumping. But we are also going to concentrate on solutions," said Harrington.

According to Harrington, the solutions include approaching the Verde River as a critical element to the well being of all communities and species within the watershed, water conservation, low-impact and planned growth, and changes in state law.

"We feel it is going to take a real grassroots effort to get the right people's attention," said Harrington, "and the way to do that is to have people engaging people."