



News Release

March 28, 2019

PARTNERSHIP PRESERVES RECREATIONAL GATEWAY TO WILD ARIZONA LANDSCAPES

PAYSON, Arizona—Access to some of Central Arizona’s most treasured wild trails, streams and outdoor recreation areas was preserved this week thanks to a partnership between Western Rivers Conservancy and the Tonto National Forest.

On Wednesday, Western Rivers Conservancy conveyed the 149-acre Doll Baby Ranch to the agency, permanently securing a recreational gateway to more than 250 square miles of the Mazatzal Wilderness and surrounding Tonto National Forest. The ranch, which Western Rivers Conservancy purchased in 2017, traces a mile of the East Verde River, a haven for fish and wildlife on the edge of the Sonoran Desert.

“The East Verde is the finest arm of the Verde River and an important freshwater lifeline for the diverse fish and wildlife of the Tonto National Forest,” said Zach Spector, Project Operations Director for Western Rivers Conservancy. “We are thrilled with the outcome of this effort, which will bolster one of the most important freshwater ecosystems in the state while also meeting the needs of a wide variety of recreational users.”

The project ensures that the Tonto National Forest now controls the road to the Doll Baby trailhead, which is a primary access route into the adjacent Mazatzal Wilderness, the Verde Wild and Scenic River Corridor and the Arizona National Historic Trail. The transfer also secures the only access to the Crackerjack Mine Loop Road, a popular off-highway vehicle (OHV) destination near Payson—access that could have been restricted to private use had Western Rivers Conservancy not purchased the property.

“This project is a huge win for visitors to Arizona’s spectacular rim country, people who hike, ride horses, hunt and explore off-highway vehicle roads,” said Debbie Cress, Payson District Ranger. “More than five million people visit the Tonto each year, and it is critically important that the Doll Baby road and trail access remains open to all.”

By conserving a key stretch of the East Verde River, the project will also benefit at least 10 native fish species, including Colorado pikeminnow, Gila topminnow and razorback sucker, all federally endangered. The ranch and the surrounding national forest are also designated Critical Habitat for narrow-headed garter snake, northern Mexican garter snake, Mexican spotted owl and Chiricahua leopard frog—all threatened species.

Conservation of the Doll Baby Ranch was made possible with funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. LWCF was established by Congress in 1964 as a bipartisan effort to

safeguard the nation's most important natural areas and to ensure recreational access for all Americans, including anglers, hikers, hunters, boaters, birders and others.

“Our efforts on the East Verde River received critical funding through the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and we are especially grateful to the late Senator John McCain for his ardent support of this project,” Spector said.

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ABOUT THE PROJECT PARTNERS

Western Rivers Conservancy acquires lands along rivers throughout the West to conserve critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By cooperating with local agencies and organizations and by applying decades of land acquisition experience, WRC secures the health of whole ecosystems. WRC has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great western rivers, including the Rio Grande, Yampa, John Day, Gunnison, Salmon, Snake, North Umpqua, Klamath and Madison Rivers. To learn more, visit www.westernrivers.org.

Tonto National Forest encompasses nearly 3 million acres of rugged and spectacularly beautiful country, ranging from Saguaro cactus-studded desert to pine-forested mountains beneath the Mogollon Rim. As the fifth largest forest in the United States, the Tonto is home to more than 400 vertebrate species, including 21 listed as threatened, endangered or state sensitive. www.fs.usda.gov/tonto

CONTACT INFORMATION

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