

Floodprone Land Acquisition Program (FLAP) Property Highlights



Water flow at Golder Ranch Bridge 2004

Floodprone Land Acquisition: Cañada del Oro

Fee Lands: 193.09 acres
Acquired: 2003/2004
Cost: \$9,001,165
Fund: 2004 Bond Funds; District Tax Levy
Grant: \$3,000,000

Background

The Cañada del Oro watershed begins in the high elevations of the Santa Catalina Mountains north of Tucson, AZ and covers approximately 63 square miles. For nearly the first mile and one-half after the wash enters Pima County at the Pima/Pinal line, the land is sparsely populated. Moving further south along the wash there are approximately 200 parcels with some portion in the floodplain. The parcels along the watercourse range in size from one-half acre up to one 320-acre parcel owned by the State. Approximately 33% of the acreage along the wash contains some floodplain land.

Most parcels are centered north and south of the Golder Ranch Bridge in Section 15. With a mix of manufactured homes, mobile homes and a few site-built homes, the largest parcel was home to White Dog Ranch, a long time commercial stable. Many property owners along the watercourse had been there for decades with some settling before zoning and floodplain management were implemented in the County.

Fire, Flood and its Aftermath – August 2003

In the summer of 2003, a major forest fire in the watershed changed the hydrologic characteristics within the Cañada del Oro watershed. Moderate to high burn severity denuded the drainage basin, greatly increasing the chances of flooding during monsoon season. In August 2003, one significant rainfall event occurred in the mountains resulting in flows of approximately 7,000 cubic feet per second along the Cañada del Oro – a 25 year flow. The area was evacuated by Sheriff's Deputies and almost all the homes in the low area on both sides of the wash received flows high enough to enter some of the homes. Immediately following the flooding, the District began its efforts to assist the residents in the area.

Using the Floodprone Land Acquisition Program, 62 property owners of 75 parcels totaling nearly 200 acres asked to be appraised. As of July 2004, 47 owners had accepted the District's offers netting 151 acres of land or approximately one-third of the total in the floodplain of the CDO. Requests for consideration continued to come into the District with others, however, electing to remain in their homes. The cost to the District had been substantial –\$7,880,641 for real property and \$1,120,524 paid as relocation benefits to displaced home owners. The receipt of a federal grant to prevent repetitive flood losses of \$3 million dollars aided the District with some of the costs.

Historical and Cultural Resources

The White Dog Ranch began operations in the 1930's serving the needs of the equestrian population in rural Catalina. There were plans for it to again serve as a ranch, working with local 4-H groups and the Pima County Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department. Further research found no significant archeological or historic sites within the parcels that are now part of the Catalina Regional Park. (Source: Cañada del Oro Ecological Reconnaissance; Phillip C. Rosen; May 15-19, 2004)



Intersection of Wilds Road and Lago del Oro Parkway in August 2003 - Photo by Regional Flood Control District

Biological Resources

In the northern reach of the Canada del Oro located in adjacent Pinal County, the stream is more hydro-riparian with cottonwood, willow, thornscrub and abundant desert grasses. After passing into Pima County it transitions to xero-riparian habitat with catclaw acacia, mesquite, desert willow, hackberry and walnut trees. A study found 103 plant species (86 native:17 non-native) in a single 300 meter reach along the northern watercourse. Birds, amphibians, mammals and reptiles are abundant along the CDO. Several varieties of lizard are prevalent in the area as are many snake species. A pond in the southern area is home to native Sonoran mud turtles, Red-eared sliders and may have contained fish at one time. Two Priority Vulnerable Species, Bell's Vireo and Abert's Towhee, are present, with suitable habitat for others to occur. Within Pima County, this area is similar to the natural riparian corridor only found at Cienega Creek.

Management

The Cañada del Oro eventually merges with Sutherland Wash and passes onto Arizona State Trust Land at Catalina State Park, establishing connectivity between the upper and lower reaches. With the acquisitions along the CDO, the District was able to retire 23 active wells. To ensure conservation and determine future planning, the District has used these wells to monitor groundwater levels. Water levels have been rising since the wells were taken out of production, and in some areas, the depth to groundwater is about 30 feet which is suitable to support cottonwoods. Maintaining the meso-riparian environment along both the CDO and Sutherland Wash will be dependent upon groundwater in the area. Two homes outside of the floodplain were kept, with one being occupied by a caretaker who monitors off-road vehicle use, vandalism, trespass, wildcat dumping, wood cutting and other detrimental activities that often take place on government owned lands.

Recreation - Catalina Regional Park

Following the floods in 2003 and the acquisition of nearly four miles of contiguous land along the CDO, utilizing the land for the benefit of the increasing populations in and around the Catalina area seemed a logical next step. Pima County's Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department began meeting with residents to get ideas on what they would like to see happen along the wash. A regional park with an equestrian-oriented theme was something many residents were eager to see. There was much enthusiasm for both active and passive types of recreation including horseback riding, birding activities, learning opportunities for children and adults, and the establishment of a native plant nursery. These were just some of the elements neighbors seemed to favor. The County and the District are firmly committed to enhancing recreational opportunities in this growing area of Pima County.



Wetland area in Catalina Regional Park. Photo by Don Carter.



View of Golder Ranch Bridge 2004

