

Cienega Valley-Empire Ranch Reserve



Empirita Ranch

Fee lands: 2,700 acres
Cost: \$10,839,500
Acquired: August 14, 2009
Fund: 2004 Bond Funds
Partner: Arizona Land and Water Trust

Background

The Empirita (little Empire) Ranch actually broke off from the larger Empire Ranch in 1941. In 1991 and 92, the Pima County Flood Control District purchased 360 acres of the Empirita Ranch. In 2001, Pima County's acquisition of the 2,700-acre Empirita property conserved the last remaining portions of the private land that comprised the historic Empirita Ranch. With assistance from the Arizona Land and Water Trust, the County negotiated the purchase of the Empirita property, along with the owner assigning the County its contractual right to withdraw up to 1,600 acre feet of groundwater annually from the Cienega Creek Basin. The Empirita acquisition expands upon already conserved reserves, including the Coronado National Forest, the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area, and the County's Bar V Ranch, Empirita Ranch and Cienega Creek Natural Preserve.

Historical and Cultural Resources

There is a High sensitive archaeological zone, as defined by the SDCP, associated with Wakefield Canyon Wash. Several known sites are located immediately adjacent to the County lands. Historically, the Empirita Ranch has roots dating back to the 1800s. The old "cowboy house" at the primary ranch headquarters dating back to the 1880's was completely restored in 2009.

Biological Resources

The Empirita property is primarily a grassland system and contains a combination of native and semi-desert grassland with mesquite woodland washes. It falls within the Biological Core designation of the Conservation Lands System, with significant Important Riparian areas. The property supports habitat for many species, including 9 Priority Vulnerable Species, including Allen's Big-eared bat, which the Science Technical Advisory team had noted in their early summer 2009 meeting was a species for which more conserved habitat in the County was needed. The property is an important transition habitat on the north end of the Whetstone Mountains.

Management

This portion of the historic Empirita Ranch has been a working landscape since the early 1900s. The County's Natural Resources, Parks and Recreation Department (NRPR) manages the Empirita property as part of a working landscape similar to other ranch properties and in cooperation with BLM, State Land, and the U.S. Forest Service. Under a management agreement, a local rancher grazes limited livestock on the property and uses the historic ranch headquarters for grazing on adjacent state and federal lands. Acquisition of this property provides additional management options within the broader Las Cienegas Watershed area. The property is being evaluated for the potential to establish and/or maintain year-round water for wildlife. Access to the property is controlled by a permit system and portions of the ranch are closed to public entry or use to protect habitat and watershed values. An access map is included in the appendix.



Photo by Arizona Land and Water Trust

Recreation

Access to the Empirita property and State Trust or public lands are only through the County fee lands and is available by free permit from the Natural Resources Parks and Recreation Department. A limited number of vehicle permits are available each day to limit impacts of recreational use and control potential vandalism incidents. Primary recreational uses include hiking, hunting, horseback riding and off highway vehicle travel. The Whetstone Mountains of the Coronado National Forest, have limited access available and routes through the County acquisitions are one of the key routes now open to the public.

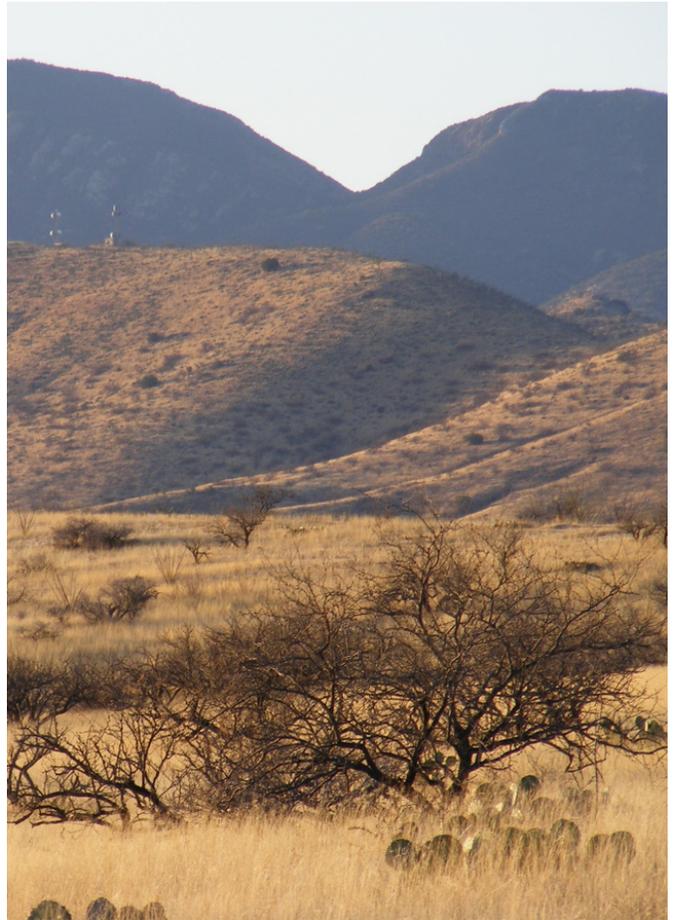


Photo by Arizona Land and Water Trust



New Empirita fencing and gate for access control. Photo by Joe Kellner

Ongoing Property Improvements

- New public access routes off Empirita Ranch Road were constructed in 2009 in cooperation with Arizona Game and Fish Department. (see appendix)
- A solar water well site was developed establishing year-round water for wildlife.
- Historic buildings on the site were stabilized to reduce further deterioration.
- One of the historic retaque corrals made of interwoven mesquite branches was rebuilt by the property manager.
- Security fencing added and signage for recreational users.
- Permanent rangeland monitoring sites will be established on the property to help property manage any livestock use.

