

Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan Newsletter

“To ensure the long-term survival of the full spectrum of plants and animals that are indigenous to Pima County through maintaining or improving the ecosystem structures and functions necessary for their survival.”

June 2009

Land and Water-rights Acquisitions

In June the Pima County’s Board of Supervisors approved an agreement to purchase 2,914 acres of land for the region’s open space network. : (1) west of the Whetstone Mountains in Empirita Ranch (2700 acres), (2) adjacent to Saguaro National Park West (160 acres), and (3) along Hardy Wash in the Tortolita piedmont (50 ac.). In addition to these acquisitions, Pima County will also receive 1,600 acre feet of groundwater pumping rights from the Rocking K development. If the pumping were allowed, it would have been a serious threat to Cienega Creek, one of our most important refugia for native fish and frogs. The Empirita acquisition will ensure pre-SDCP plans for development are never realized, and in doing so, protect additional biological core areas in the Conservation Lands System.



At left, PAG staff conducting monitoring at the Cienega Creek Natural Preserve. Photo by Mead Mier. At right, view toward Rincon Peak from the planned Empirita acquisition near the Whetstone Mountains. The acquisition includes water rights to Cienega Creek, and precludes development of the Empirita planned community. Photo provided by Diana Durazo.

Invasive-species Management

Efforts were undertaken to remove Arundo, an exotic shrub otherwise known as wild cane or bamboo, from Bear Canyon. Buffelgrass is being treated at the West Branch (Santa Cruz River). County staff, along with National Park Service and U.S. Forest Service staff are close to completing the set up phase of aerial spraying project to control buffelgrass in the Tucson Mountain Park. Spraying will take place from helicopters in late July or early August with follow-up monitoring in September. Operations-level supervisors in county agencies were also trained on buffelgrass control measures. The Buffelgrass Coordination Center hired Ms. Lindy Brigham as their Executive Director.

Regulatory Reform

Pima County Board of Supervisors approved an amendment to the Native Plant Preservation Ordinance, allowing off-site mitigation for impacts to protected plants including the saguaro and Pima pineapple cactus. The off-site option must be used in conjunction with one of the three pre-existing methods of preservation. The reason for the change was because there are situations in which off-site mitigation might more adequately compensate for impacts to protected plants. Despite these changes, the 30% set-aside method remains the preferred method of mitigation.

Species News



A recent survey of bat use of caves stabilized and constructed by County staff showed presence of Mexican long-tongued bats and Townsend's bats, two of Pima County's priority vulnerable species. The bat cave construction was funded by the Arizona Game and Fish Department's Heritage Program. NRPR recently received a grant from U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to construct several more artificial bat caves in the area. No pygmy owls were detected during this season's surveys at the Stevens property. California leaf-nosed bats were found roosting in Tucson Mountain Park.



Outside and inside an artificial cave constructed for rare bat species which use Pima County open-space land. The Mexican long-tongued bat, *Choeronycteris* uses agave and saguaro blossoms as a food source, and is known to take nectar at hummingbird feeders. Young are born in June and July. Unlike the endangered lesser long-nosed bat, *Choeronycteris* bats are not strongly colonial. Their roosts and maternity sites are small, sometimes unstable, and very sensitive to disturbance. Stabilized caves have been successful in maintaining Townsend's bat (*Plecotus townsendii*). Photos by Iris Rodden. Illustration by George Maleski.