

STATEMENT OF  
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY  
TO THE  
WATER AND NATURAL RESOURCES COMMITTEE  
ON THE  
ARIZONA WATER SETTLEMENTS ACT  
GILA RIVER PLANNING PROCESS STATUS  
August 1, 2011

The natural values of the Gila River are extraordinary and we can sustain them while building a strong local economy.

The Gila River, one of the Southwest's last free-flowing rivers, is a critically important place for conservation of New Mexico's and the nation's natural heritage. The river supports some of the best remaining populations of five federally-listed endangered or threatened species, and it is home to perhaps the highest density of breeding birds in the U.S. For well over a century those who live on the Gila have worked together to protect this natural heritage while building a strong natural resources-based economy.

The Nature Conservancy appreciates the AWSA stakeholder input and review process.

Having invested deeply in land and water rights and in relationships with our neighbors and partners on the river for more than a quarter-century, TNC appreciates the public process carried out by the ISC to guide AWSA implementation in New Mexico. It is critical to the success of the AWSA, which emphasizes the use of water for public benefit, that there be a process whereby stakeholders can review, comment on, and help improve projects funded by the Act.

Design, selection and funding of AWSA projects must be consistent with the Gila River community's history of pragmatic collaboration.

As appreciative as we are of the State's preliminary process for stakeholder input, now is the time that the critical decisions will be made. The Nature Conservancy calls on the State of New Mexico and the ISC to recognize the power of a science-based and collaborative approach by developing a transparent process – one that includes continued input from stakeholders – for design, selection and implementation of AWSA-funded projects, whereby individuals and groups are granted frequent opportunities for meaningful review of prospective projects. Such community engagement will ultimately benefit the people of southwestern New Mexico by helping develop public support for well designed, well implemented projects that help meet water supply needs while sustaining the natural benefits the Gila River has long provided.

Martha Cooper, [mschumann@tnc.org](mailto:mschumann@tnc.org), (575) 535-4417 *office* (575) 590-2594 *cell*