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Western Rivers Conservancy and Coconino National Forest conserve last unprotected reach of Fossil Creek

Yavapai County, AZ – This week, Western Rivers Conservancy conveyed 19 acres along Fossil Creek to Coconino National Forest. The transfer completes the Fossil Creek National Wild and Scenic River corridor and conserves the last unprotected reach of this unique mineral-laden stream.

WRC purchased the land from a private seller in 2015 with the goal of conserving the property for its crucial fish and wildlife habitat and to improve the integrity of the Wild and Scenic River corridor.

“Acquisition of this property was made possible through funding from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, thanks to the support of Senator McCain and the Arizona Congressional Delegation,” said Dieter Erdmann, WRC’s Interior West Program Director.

Long before WRC began its effort at Fossil Creek, the stream was the subject of the largest river recovery effort in the Southwest. In the past, Fossil Creek was dewatered by a hydroelectric project for nearly a century. In 1999, state and federal agencies and restoration groups embarked on a massive restoration effort. In 2005, after a diversion dam that blocked flows along more than 80% of the stream was removed, Fossil Creek became a free-flowing river once again.

Four years later, Congress designated all 17 miles of the stream Wild and Scenic. The stream has fully recovered and again become a haven for fish and wildlife and a mecca for people who visit the river to swim, hike, birdwatch and fish.

Fossil Creek is a principal tributary to the Verde River, Arizona’s other Wild and Scenic River. It flows through two exceptional wilderness areas, the Fossil Springs Wilderness and the Mazatzal Wilderness. Fossil Creek’s headwaters are Fossil Springs, near the Mogollon Rim. High in calcium carbonate, the water in the stream creates stunning travertine formations and spectacular pools that range from aquamarine to deep blue.

Fossil Creek is protected along its entire length by both its Wild and Scenic designation and by the two wilderness areas. Only this small stretch of the river remained unprotected.

“The Coconino and Tonto National Forests have been working with Western Rivers Conservancy for years to acquire this property so that the entire length of Fossil Creek can belong to the public,” said Nicole Branton, Red Rock District Ranger. “Now that the Wild and Scenic River is complete, the Forest Service can more effectively manage it for the sake of the stream’s fragile fish and wildlife and to ensure that visitors have safe and sustainable access to this magnificent place.”

Today more than 80 special-status species inhabit the area along and around Fossil Creek. Fifteen bat species occur in the river corridor, as do numerous bird species, including black hawks, peregrine falcons, bald eagles, Bell’s vireos, Lucy’s warblers and verdins. The stream now supports nine native fish species, including spikedace, loach minnow, Gila topminnow (all endangered), speckled dace and Sonora sucker. Along with the stream’s unique mineral formations, the presence of these fish gives the creek national significance.

“Fossil Creek is a rare and spectacular stream that Arizonans have worked tirelessly to restore,” said Erdmann. “Western Rivers Conservancy is proud to have played a small but important role in ensuring this great river stays healthy for fish and wildlife and for people to enjoy.”

About Western Rivers Conservancy

Western Rivers Conservancy is a nonprofit organization that protects outstanding river ecosystems in the western United States. WRC acquires lands along rivers to protect critical habitat and to create or improve public access for compatible use and enjoyment. By applying decades of experience in land acquisition, WRC is able to effectively secure the health of whole ecosystems. It has protected hundreds of miles of stream frontage on great rivers like the Yampa, Gunnison, Salmon, Hoh, Snake, Madison, Klamath and John Day. Founded in 1988, WRC is the nation’s only conservation program dedicated solely to the acquisition of riverlands. To learn more about WRC, visit www.westernrivers.org.

About the U.S. Forest Service

The mission of the U.S. Forest Service is to sustain the health, diversity and productivity of the nation's forests and grasslands to meet the needs of present and future generations. The agency manages 193 million acres of public land, provides assistance to state and private landowners, and maintains the largest forestry research organization in the world. Visit www.coconinonationalforest.us or follow the Coconino Nation Forest at www.twitter.com/coconinonf.

About the Land and Water Conservation Fund

Created by Congress in 1965, the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) was a bipartisan commitment to safeguard natural areas, water resources and our cultural heritage, and to provide recreation opportunities to all Americans. National parks like Rocky Mountain, the Grand Canyon, and the Great Smoky Mountains, as well as national wildlife refuges, national forests, rivers and lakes, community parks, trails and ball fields in every one of our 50 states were set

aside for Americans to enjoy thanks to federal funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).