

An Introduction to the Arizona Forest Legacy Program



Written by Megan Lasley, Forestry Outreach Coordinator and Matthew Jewell, Forest Legacy Program Manager; October 2023

What is it?

The Forest Legacy Program is a conservation program administered and funded through the USDA Forest Service, in partnership with State agencies, to encourage the protection of privately-owned forest lands through conservation easements or land purchases. It is designed to identify and permanently protect environmentally important private forest areas that would otherwise be developed or fragmented. With more than half of the United States forested land owned and managed by private owners, the protection and connectivity of these forested lands maintain a multitude of public benefits. Opportunities to hunt, fish, and camp; clean and abundant drinking water; habitat for fish and wildlife; and timber, fuel wood, and other forest products are just a few of the public benefits enhanced through this program.



Pictured: Mesquite and Oak woodlands span the Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridors Forest Legacy project.

The Forest Legacy Program provides economic incentives for landowners to keep their forests as forests, which also supports sustainable forest management and forest product markets. While the forest product industry in Arizona is relatively small in scale, it is a main source of employment in some rural communities around the state. In addition, many thousands are employed in nature-based tourism, outdoor recreation, and conservation industries created by Arizona's magnificent natural landscapes. Tourism driven by access to forested areas for recreational activities has a positive economic impact, bringing in visitors, supporting jobs and income, and creating tax revenue for local communities and businesses. The Forest Legacy Program contributes to these positive economic impacts by keeping natural spaces protected, healthy, and managed with the goal of enhancing the many benefits they provide.

How Does it Work?

The program empowers private landowners to voluntarily participate in the conservation and protection of land for local community benefit. Interested private landowners have the option to retain the property rights and manage the forests themselves with education, tools, and strategies provided by the Forestry Legacy Program, or they can sell it outright for the state to manage and maintain. Regardless of ownership type, the program pays private forest landowners to keep their forested property as a healthy, working forest in perpetuity.

Project Highlight - Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridors

The Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor is an impressive Forest Legacy project in southern Arizona located just outside the Town of Patagonia and conserving 386 acres of Madrean Oak woodlands. A wildlife corridor is a strip of natural habitat connecting populations of wildlife that are otherwise separated by cultivated or developed land. This particular corridor is located within a globally-recognized hotspot for biodiversity known as the Sky Islands. There are more than 30 mountain ranges in the Sky Islands, but the valleys connecting the ranges are highly threatened by development and fragmentation.

In 2006, the Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor was ranked by the Arizona Game & Fish Department as an important linkage for black bears and mountain lions, and was the highest-ranked linkage for jaguars moving between Mexico, the Huachuca and the Santa Rita Mountain ranges. These are landscape species, meaning they need expansive areas to survive. Wildlife corridors allow these species to move from one habitat patch to another without crossing human-caused barriers which can put the animals, and potentially humans, at risk. Local landowners and organizations have since worked together to secure conservation easements on private land to protect the safe movement of wildlife in the area. This project now serves as the sole unobstructed wildlife corridor bridging two US Forest Service Ranger districts within the Sky Islands of Arizona, and links protected land from the Sky Islands of Mexico all the way through the San Rafael Valley into the Santa Rita Mountains.

In addition to the benefits provided for wildlife and habitat, this project increases public access to recreational opportunities through a trail easement that helps to construct, maintain, and manage a 1.3-mile connector trail that is part of the Arizona Trail. Local water resources are being protected through onsite riparian restoration efforts led by Borderlands Restoration Network. A study by the University of Arizona found that nature-based tourism, industries, conservation, and restoration activities in Santa Cruz County (where the project is located)



Pictured: El Jefe, a large male North American Jaguar that roamed Southern Arizona's mountain ranges for several years.

directly supported 779 jobs, contributed to 76.6 million in sales, and 31.1 million to the county GDP in 2019 (Duval et. al., 2021). These numbers show how strategic conservation like the Forest Legacy Program can simultaneously benefit environmental and economic goals in Arizona.

The Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor continues to be a source of pride for the community; private landowners involved in the project have worked to identify additional key parcels and raise funds for the purchase and conservation of 2,200 acres adjacent to the project. The landowners and DFFM are currently partnering to apply for Phase III Forest Legacy funds, for an additional 683 acres protected.

Works Cited

Duval, D., Bickel, A.K., Frisvold, G., Zheng, W. (2021). "The Nature-Based Restorative Economy in Santa Cruz County." Dept. of Agricultural & resource Economics, Cooperative Extension, University of Arizona, 1. <https://economics.arizona.edu/nature-based-restorative-economy-santa-cruz-county-arizona>

Arizona Forest Legacy Program At-A-Glance

3 Projects Completed

1,628 acres of private forested land protected

- **Cedar Springs** - 630 acres protected northwest of Flagstaff, AZ containing a key natural spring that feeds into the Coconino National Forest ecosystem and is one of the highest points in elevation in the Hydrologic Unit Codes 8 Havasu Canyon watershed.
- **San Pedro River Ecosystem** - 694 acres of riparian forest protected in Cascabel, AZ along the San Pedro River, contributing to large landscape-level collaborative efforts that have protected 65,000 acres of riparian forest in the San Pedro River Watershed.
- **Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor** - 386 acres containing Madrean oak woodland habitat protected outside of Patagonia, AZ contributing to a critical migratory linkage for over 400,000 acres of US Forest Service lands and Wilderness Areas.

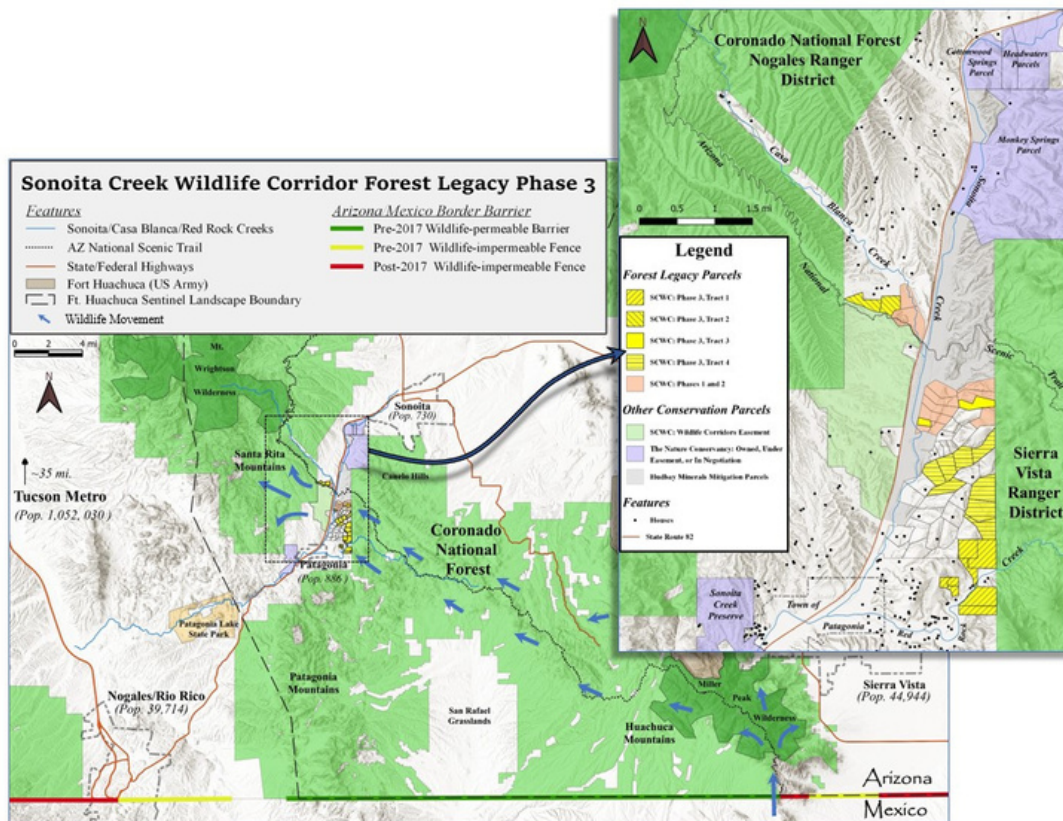
3 Projects in Progress

Approximately 1,309 acres of private forested land protected

- **Cochise Stronghold** - 552 acres of Madrean oak woodland habitat, an important groundwater recharge site, and a renowned population of Sandhill Cranes.
- **Bull Basin** - 160 acres of healthy, improved stands of ponderosa pine with seasonal wetlands that support a wide variety of wildlife and popular recreation activities such as hunting, camping, and hiking.
- **San Pedro Riparian Forest Protection (ElQuen)** - 2 mile stretch of year-round flowing river corridor that shares a boundary with the San Pedro Riparian National Conservation Area, which is designated as a Global Important Bird and Biodiversity area supporting 250 species of migratory birds, 84 species of mammals, and 100 species of nesting birds. The project contains large healthy riparian forests of cottonwood, willow, sycamore, and mesquite bosque.

Looking Forward

The 2023 Forest Legacy Fiscal Year Budget is the highest in Arizona's history. Out of 34 projects chosen for national funding in fiscal year 2023, two Arizona projects were selected for a total of \$3.64 million dollars. These two projects alone will protect 712 acres of priority forested land as identified in the State Forest Action Plan. Learn more about the projects selected for funding in the [USDA Forest Service's official announcement](#).



Pictured: Sonoita Creek Wildlife Corridor Phase 3 Forest Legacy Project Proposal Map. This map shows how the project is contributing to a critically important protected wildlife corridor between two US Forest Service Ranger Districts and other neighboring protected land.

Learn More

[USDA Forest Service Forest Legacy Webpage](#)

[Forest Legacy Program Data Dashboard](#)

[Forest Legacy Interactive Map](#)

[DFFM Forest Legacy Webpage](#)



For more information, reach out to:

Matthew Jewell, Forest Legacy Program Manager
mjewell@dffm.az.gov; 520-260-0476

LoriAnne Barnett Warren, Specialized Forestry Programs Administrator
lwarren@dffm.az.gov; 602-399-9447