



*Ironwood
Essence*

Friends of Ironwood Forest

Spring 2026

New Threats to Ironwood Forest National Monument



Friends President Christine Flanagan describes current threats to the Monument on April 4 at Meet the Monument, held at the Waterman Restoration Interpretive Site.



What's Inside

Multiple Threats to IFNM.....	Page 2
Beating Back Buffelgrass	Page 6
Stinknet Pull	Page 7
Meet the Monument 2026.....	Page 8
President's Message	Page 9
Board Member News	Page 11
Ironwood Gallery	Page 13

Ironwood Forest is Facing Multiple Threats

*Christine Flanagan
President, Friends of Ironwood Forest*

As I write this on Monday, April 5, the political environment around Ironwood Forest National Monument continues to simmer, spawning foreseeable threats but often releasing some surprising bubbles. Along with the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection (CSDP) and our other conservation partners, we will continue to monitor developments. At this moment, here is the rundown starting with our own backyard and moving on to national issues:

The **Silverbell Mine (ASARCO) would like to enlarge its operation:** We believe the mine has asked for about 11,000 acres to be removed from IFNM. The mine abuts IFNM and maintains 196 valid mining claims within the Monument that it cannot develop currently. The claims were established prior to 2000 when the Monument was declared. This information is based on a 2017 written comment to the Department of Interior during the first Trump administration. We believe that Silverbell Mine has reactivated this request behind the scenes in the current, and receptive, administration, although we haven't received a written indication this year. Be assured that many are watching the

Department of Interior for any action on this request.

A possible request to revive target shooting in the Monument: The Lower Sonoran Field Office of the Bureau of Land Management opened a 30-day public comment period to seek input on where and whether an expansion of recreational target shooting should be reauthorized in our neighboring Sonoran Desert National Monument (SDNM). The comment period closed on March 30. BLM's field office in Phoenix believes that shooting aligns with President Trump's Executive Order 14313, "Establishing the President's Make America Beautiful Again Commission," to expand access to public lands and waters for recreation, hunting, and fishing. The SDNM, established in 2001, contains about 486,400 acres of BLM-managed public lands in Maricopa and Pinal counties with nearly 5300 acres currently available for recreational target shooting. Plans are afoot to renew previous lawsuits that successfully prevented efforts to expand target shooting in SDNM. FIF is carefully watching and will respond if there is similar pressure to reopen IFNM to target shooting. For more information on SDNM, please contact

the Lower Sonoran Field Office at blm_az_pdo@blm.gov or 602-867-5400.

Next is I-11: In 2010, a new interstate, I-11, was included in the reauthorization act for the Federal Highway Administration. It was regarded as a key connector for the economic triangle defined by Los Angeles, Las Vegas and Phoenix, and would eventually be extended to the Canadian border. In Arizona, I-11 was proposed as an expansion of Hwy 93 between Phoenix and Kingman. That segment has been largely completed, as has sections in Nevada. The sections now under consideration run from Wickenburg to Casa Grande, and Casa Grande to Nogales. There are two routes under consideration south of Casa Grande: The West Pima Option (through Avra Valley) would cut a new swath through the desert and agricultural lands along the eastern border of the Monument, crossing Ajo highway and eventually connecting into I-19. The East Pima Option (colocation on I-10 through Tucson) would come south of Casa Grande west of I-10 to south of Picacho, and then



turn east to join I-10 and continue south along I-19 to the border. If the West Option is chosen, it would **cut off active migration routes** for wildlife that currently connect Ironwood with the nearby Picacho, Tortolita, Tucson, and Catalina mountain ranges. This would severely impact the ability of the Monument to support wildlife populations during times of urban expansion and climate change. To see these highway alternatives, go to <http://i11study.com/arizona/Map.asp>. The timeline there is outdated, but the map continues to be relevant. For a current update, see Howard Fischer's front-page article in the *Arizona Daily Star* on April 5, 2026, and ADOT's <https://azdot.gov/adot-blog/director-adot-making-progress-interstate-11>.

Currently, a court-ordered repeat of the environmental impact study is underway. We expect it to be completed this fall with a recommendation adverse to IFNM. Following completion, a new public comment period will open this fall. When that happens, we will need everyone's effort to support IFNM.

A solar field proposed to support the Pinal Data Center: These are proposed for construction in Pinal County close to Sasco Road, along a western border of the Monument. Again, this would impact a key migratory route for animals that attempt to cross the Santa Cruz River bosque area enroute to the Picacho Mountains. FIF and CSDP opposed the projects. Watch for news coming out of Pinal County.

A bill by Representative Gosar of Maricopa County: Introduced in September 2025, H.R. 5393, euphemistically named the “Southern Arizona Protection Act” would nullify President Clinton’s proclamation to establish Ironwood Forest National Monument. Its intent is to remove protections while supporting mining efforts. Although it appears that the bill is not likely to reach the House floor, it is worrisome in that it raises the profile of IFNM, promotes questions about how public lands are managed for multiple use, and generates fears about application of the Congressional Review Act (CRA), a calamitous development for public lands.

Finally, watch for an IFNM action under the CRA: Enacted in 1996, this is an obscure law that allows Congress to overturn federal agency regulations by passing a joint resolution of disapproval with a simple majority and it prohibits the agency from proposing a new, substantially similar law. The complicated, mind-numbing nature of this development plays into the hands of the administration, so bear with me. *The CRA has not historically been applied to Resource Management Plans (RMPs) of public lands.* But in 2025, it was used to nullify the plans for five public land entities in Alaska, Montana, and North Dakota. In March 2026, Senator Mike Lee introduced a bill to subject the management plan for Grand Staircase National Monument in Utah to the CRA. Senate action is expected soon after recess. If the House and Senate both pass resolutions to nullify the

management plan, it will go to President Trump for signature. This effort is being regarded as a precedent that would open all monuments, wilderness areas, etc. to use of the CRA. This is a potentially catastrophic development in the sense that management plans are the established playbook for users and managers of public lands. They establish how decisions are made and how the sensitive and significant conservation areas of public lands will be protected. RMPs are usually developed over years of consultation with local groups. Ironwood’s plan was developed over 13 years and guides the use by hunters, off-road enthusiasts, the Friends, hikers, campers, ranchers, guides, you, and everyone else who wants to use our Monument. If our RMP is nullified, it will call into question every permit and decision that has been issued under its authority and IFNM’s management guidelines would revert back to the management framework originally developed under the Federal Land Policy Management Act of 1976. Those older plans generally prioritized extraction and grazing and did not include conservation as a named priority for management. If our RMP is nullified, IFNM would likely be opened to currently prohibited uses. Needless to say, the Friends are watching the proceedings with Grand Staircase very carefully in case Ironwood Forest is targeted.

So, what can you do? Stay tuned, and help us educate others! If a friend adds their name to our newsletter list, they will be updated on

developments around these threats and learn about specific actions we will recommend to help protect our Monument. When a call for action is initiated, it will be important to respond in a timely manner. This administration often drastically shortens comment periods, and our voices will need to be heard. For example, a comment period concerning a recent proposal opening areas around Chaco Canyon for oil and gas leasing was open for only 7 days!

Thank you all for being a stalwart Friend of Ironwood. We are all in this together.

What you can do

- **Stay alert and informed** – join our email list [here](#) and get timely updates.
- **Educate others** and sign them up.
- **Respond quickly** to calls for action – public comment periods can be very short. Legislators want to be re-elected and don't want unhappy voters. Let your representatives know how you feel. The number of calls and emails “for” or “against” an issue is more important than message content.



Proposed I-11 “West Pima” route through Avra Valley.

Arizona-Sonora
Desert Museum

Beating back Buffelgrass!



Friends' volunteers removed invasive buffelgrass from Samaniego Hills on February 27. This common invasive grass is an extreme fire hazard. Because Sonoran Desert plants are not accustomed to intense hot wildfires, fire-adapted buffelgrass kills and replaces native flora when it burns. These mitigation efforts are supported by a grant from Tucson Electric Power and donations from Friends like *you!*



From left: Rocco Paone, Trish Moore, Al Mezzano, Steve Jeffrey, Marilyn Jeffrey, Timothy LeFever, Christine Flanagan, Keith Goudy and John Holzemer.

Your Financial Contributions at Work

We rely on the financial support of people like you to help us with our mission to protect the natural and cultural resources of Ironwood Forest National Monument. We also work to increase awareness of the Monument and improve visitor experience there.

Please consider donating to support our work. We couldn't do this without you. You can donate online at: <https://ironwoodforest.org/donate>

Each Stinknet plant pulled in time removes thousands of seeds!

Friends of Ironwood Forest worked with the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection to pull stinknet on March 27 along N. Aguirre Road in Avra Valley. The patch, on state land leased to local farmers, was a priority because the road is a back entrance to IFNM and crosses Los Robles wash before it reaches the State Trust land in the Monument. A large area on both sides of the road, less than 2 miles from the Monument boundary, was covered with patches of stinknet, some growing in areas traversed by farm vehicles.

Five plants had already escaped west of the colony toward IFNM along the road edge in a field.

Here's some data to think about: After those 5 plants were pulled, they were found to contain 1,737 flowers that would have matured 347,000-434,000 seeds. Yikes! Eleven volunteers worked about 3 hours in these patches to collect 9 large bags of flowering stinknet. In total, the bags weighed 100 lbs! Unfortunately, some of the patches had matured and started to shed seeds – a worrisome sign for coming years. Many thanks to Friends' board member Jackie Craig who helped us secure permission from the farmer for the pull. We don't want stinknet carried down the road, into Robles Wash and into IFNM!

From the April 3 **Stinknet Newsletter**

Alert Level ***Extreme***

Urgent to treat stinknet before it goes to seed

Current alert status is based on:

- The number of recent reports
- Many plants are beginning to go to seed



More info: <https://sdcwma.org/species/stinknet.php>

Meet the Monument 2026 is a wrap!

Meet the Monument 2026 went off without a hitch on April 4 at a new location: the [Waterman Restoration Interpretive Site](#) south of Avra Valley Road on Johnstone Mine Road.

Last year's 25th anniversary site at El Tiro Gliderport was selected for its easy vehicular access and large footprint to accommodate increased participants and visitors (thanks again to Tucson Soaring Club and

Skydive Marana). But the Friends yearned to return to a pristine location this year, without the long dirt road to the Silverbell Group Campsite used in pre-2025 years.

We were rewarded with great views, wonderful speakers and interpretive booths, as well as terrific weather – see the President's comments on page 9.



Arizona Native Plant Society Botanist John Scheuring explains the history and importance of the Waterman Restoration Interpretive Site.



AZGFD Terrestrial Wildlife Program Manager Rana Murphy discusses the history and management of the Monument's bighorn sheep population.



Friends board members, volunteers, and bat biologist Debbie Buecher greet arriving attendees to Meet the Monument 2026.



Skylar Begay, Director of Tribal Collaboration for Archaeology Southwest, explains the history of indigenous people in Ironwood Forest and the surrounding area.



From the President

By Christine Flanagan

Our 2026 Meet the Monument was an organizational success. We had wonderful speakers and exhibitors but not enough attendees (a bit less than 100)! Granted, it was a challenging spring with severe heat leading up to the original March 28 date that also happened to coincide with No Kings Day. After postponing a week to April 4, we realized that we would be competing with Easter (no surprise), but also UA at the Final Four. Nevertheless, our audience was attentive and receptive, and it was a glorious day to be in the Monument. Thank you to all who attended, and to our volunteers who worked tirelessly to make it happen!

My message is short. We need all of you to pay attention over the coming months to the developing threats to our Monument, public lands in general, and specific bills that will kneecap our agencies and reduce their ability to manage the lands under their stewardship. Developments may come fast as the political environment in Washington unspools toward the November elections. For example,

in the administration's just-released FY27 budget request, BLM's budget line was \$936 million, about 25% less than was appropriated in FY26. As with last year's request, the most severe cuts were in areas that supported conservation, wildlife, and cultural resources, while funds for managing oil and gas leases, real estate, and other "uses" were not significantly cut. Our legislators will need to hear that we want BLM, USFS, and other public land managers supported. If Stevan Pearce of New Mexico is confirmed in the coming weeks as BLM's new head, watch for new initiatives adverse to public lands. In his tenure in Congress, he was an advocate for the sale of public lands. If this fox is put in the henhouse, we'll need to pay close attention.

We are all public landowners as well as citizens. If you think of it that way, the responsibilities for our government's stewardship of public lands begins with us. Public lands are our legacy, held in common, for future generations. They should be managed that way.

Will your grandchildren hike in Ironwood as it exists now?

As a final word, I would like to thank the staff of BLM's Tucson Field Office. They are our valued partners. They steward Ironwood Forest and their other conservation lands as well as their staffing and budget allow. We applaud their efforts! They face formidable

challenges from climate change, overgrazing, urban pressure, violations of rules, invasive plants, DOI policy and administration changes, and more. Hopefully, in the future, BLM's staff and funding will be adequate to face these challenges. Our grandchildren are depending on it.

Christine Flanagan, President



It is hard to imagine freeway lights and truck stops in this view looking west across Avra Valley from McCain Loop Rd.

Our Mission

Friends of Ironwood Forest is a local non-profit organization that works for the permanent protection of the biological, geological, archaeological, and historical resources and values for which Ironwood Forest National Monument was established.

FIF provides critical volunteer labor for projects on the monument, works with the Bureau of Land Management and many other partners, and strives to increase community awareness through education, public outreach, and advocacy.

Board Member News

Welcome new Friends board member

Michael “Chappy” Chappell

The Friends welcomed Michael “Chappy” Chappell to the Board of Directors in March. Chappy is the Director of the Veteran Engagement and Trail Stewardship (VETS) Program with the Arizona Trail Association. An Arizona native and veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Chappy has built his work around the belief that public lands can serve as powerful spaces for healing, connection, and continued service.

Through his leadership with the Arizona Trail Association, he has helped create meaningful opportunities for veterans and their families to engage in stewardship, build community, and reconnect with purpose through service-based projects and events centered around "mission therapy." Since 2019, the VETS Program has served more than 500 veterans and their families, positively impacted over 150 miles of the Arizona National Scenic Trail, and contributed more than 65,000 volunteer hours.



In his role with Friends of Ironwood Forest, Chappy is committed to expanding those same kinds of opportunities within Ironwood Forest National Monument – creating pathways for veterans and their families to give back to the Monument, deepen their relationship with this remarkable landscape, and continue serving something larger than themselves. His background in outdoor education, conservation, and veteran-focused programming reflects a deep belief that stewardship can be both restorative and mission-driven.

The Board of Directors Friends of Ironwood Forest

Officers

Christine Flanagan, president
John Holzemer, vice president
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FIF Partners

Archaeology Southwest
Arizona Desert Bighorn Sheep Society
Arizona Native Plant Society
Arizona Game and Fish Department
Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum
Arizona Wildlife Federation
Avra Valley Coalition
BKW Farms
Bureau of Land Management
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Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection
Conservation Lands Foundation
Dark Sky International
Discover Marana
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Friends of Buenos Aires NWR
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Highlands Hiking Club
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Slow Body Brewery
Sky Island Alliance
Tohono O'odham Community College
Tohono O'odham Nation
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Tucson Bird Alliance
Tucson Cactus and Succulent Society
Tucson Electric Power
Tucson Herpetological Society
University of Arizona
Western Watersheds Project
Wild Arizona
The Wilderness Society

The Ironwood Gallery

Send us your favorite photographs of IFNM



Why We Love Monsoon!

Photo by Alan Nyiri

from the cover of the 2024 BLM Manager's Report for IFNM