



Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection

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July 8, 2016

Arizona Center for Law
in the Public Interest
Arizona Native Plant Society
Bat Conservation
International
Cascabel Conservation
Association
Center for Biological
Diversity
Center for Environmental
Connections
Center for Environmental
Ethics
Defenders of Wildlife
Desert Watch
Empire Fagan Coalition
Environmental and Cultural
Conservation Organization
Environmental Law Society
Friends of Cabeza Prieta
Friends of Ironwood Forest
Friends of Madera Canyon
Friends of Saguaro National
Park
Friends of Tortolita
Gates Pass Area
Neighborhood Association
Genius Loci Foundation
Native Seeds / SEARCH
Northwest Neighborhood
Alliance
Protect Land and
Neighborhoods
Safford Peak Watershed
Education Team
Save the Scenic Santa Ritas
Sierra Club – Grand Canyon
Chapter
Sierra Club – Rincon Group
Sky Island Alliance
Sky Island Watch
Society for Ecological
Restoration
Sonoran Permaculture
Guild
Southwestern Biological
Institute
Tortolita Homeowners
Association
Tucson Audubon Society
Tucson Herpetological
Society
Tucson Mountains
Association
Wildlands Network
Women for Sustainable
Technology

Interstate 11 Tier 1 EIS Study Team
c/o ADOT Communications
1655 W. Jackson St., MD 126F
Phoenix, AZ 85007

RE: Scoping Comments on the Interstate 11 Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement, Nogales to Wickenburg

To Whom It May Concern:

The Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection appreciates the opportunity to provide scoping comments for the *Interstate 11 Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), Nogales to Wickenburg*.

We submit the enclosed comments on behalf of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, founded in 1998 and comprised of 34 environmental and community groups working in Pima County, Arizona. Our mission is to achieve the long-term conservation of biological diversity and ecological function of the Sonoran Desert through comprehensive land-use planning, with primary emphasis on Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. We achieve this mission by advocating for: 1) protecting and conserving Pima County's most biologically rich areas, 2) directing development to appropriate land, and 3) requiring appropriate mitigation for impacts to habitat and wildlife species.

In summary, our scoping comments highlight the need for further evaluation of the purpose and need for this project and major environmental impacts that should be considered statewide and particularly in Pima County as this study area is evaluated. Specifically, potential environmental impacts in Pima County include impacts to federal lands such as Saguaro National Park, Ironwood Forest National Monument, and the Bureau of Reclamation's Central Arizona Project Mitigation Corridor; local conservation lands such as Tucson Mountain Park, planned mitigation lands for federal Incidental Take Permits and Habitat Conservation Plans under development by the City of Tucson, Pima County, and Town of Marana, and Pima County's Conservation Lands System; critical wildlife linkages and connectivity between large wildland blocks as described in Arizona's Wildlife Linkages Assessment, the Coyote-Ironwood-Tucson Wildlife Linkage, the Ironwood-Picacho Wildlife Linkage, and the 2012 Pima County Wildlife Connectivity Assessment conducted by the Arizona Game and Fish Department (AzGFD); and increasingly rare riparian habitat.

Purpose and Need

First and foremost, we strongly believe that ADOT should clearly and thoroughly demonstrate the need for this corridor based on the best available science and data. This includes the most current transportation and growth models and current and projected traffic volumes. The analysis must include established plans to continue widening Interstate 10 and improving capacity from Mexico's Mariposa Port of Entry and the recent approval of ADOT's 2017-2021 Five Year Plan. Elements of this Five Year Plan that must be considered include, but are not limited to, State Route 189: Nogales to Interstate 19; Interstate 19: Ajo Way traffic interchange, and; Interstate 10: State Route 87 to Picacho, Earley Road to Interstate 8, Ina Road traffic interchange, Houghton Road traffic interchange, Ruthrauff Road traffic interchange, Kino Parkway traffic interchange, and Country Club Road traffic interchange.

Also of note is Representative Ann Kirkpatrick's July 5, 2016 announcement of \$54 million secured in a highway grant for ADOT's I-10 Phoenix to Tucson Corridor Improvements Project, via the U.S. Department of Transportation's competitive FASTLANE program. Tucson Mayor Rothschild said, "Completing expansion of I-10 between Tucson and Phoenix, which now alternates between two and three lanes in each direction, will result in a safer, more efficient highway for people and freight, and that's very good news for Tucson, Phoenix and the state as a whole."¹

Major Environmental Impacts for Evaluation

Impacts to Federal and Local Protected Areas

The EIS must fully analyze the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to all federal and local protected areas and the biological resources they contain in the entire study area. For example, in Pima County the study area for the EIS encompasses Avra Valley west of the Tucson Mountains. Any alignments considered in Avra Valley would negatively impact Saguaro National Park, Tucson Mountain Park, Ironwood Forest National Monument, the Bureau of Reclamation's Central Arizona Project Mitigation Corridor, and planned mitigation lands for federal Incidental Take Permits (ITPs) and Habitat Conservation Plans (HCPs) under development by the City of Tucson, Pima County, and the Town of Marana. The Pima County Multi-Species HCP was officially approved by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) as published in the Federal Register on May 13, 2016, and the 30-year ITP will be voted on by the Pima County Board of Supervisors in September 2016. Tucson's Avra Valley HCP was submitted to the FWS in November 2014 and is currently under review. The Marana HCP is currently on hold.

¹ See <http://www.wbtv.com/story/32378220/southern-az-receives-grant-to-improve-i-10-between-phoenix-and-tucson>.

In addition, the study area in Pima and Pinal Counties encompasses smaller, yet still vitally important, local protected areas such as Tortolita Mountain Park, the Hardy Wash system and Arthur Pack Regional Park, and others. All of these protected lands are public investments in conservation.

For the entire project, please note that reduced ecological values due to the effects of fragmentation by any proposed infrastructure developments, including highways, should be avoided to the greatest extent practicable; any unavoidable impacts should be minimized; and all impacts should be mitigated to the fullest extent where avoidance and minimization are deemed impossible.

Impacts to Wildlife Linkages

The EIS must fully analyze the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to all of the identified wildlife linkages in the entire study area. For example, in Pima County an Interstate 11 alignment through Avra Valley would sever critical wildlife linkages that have been identified for protection by state and local agencies through various planning processes. Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, a nationally-recognized regional conservation plan developed and implemented over the last 18 years, identifies a Critical Landscape Connection across the Central Arizona Project canal in Avra Valley. The Arizona Wildlife Linkages Workgroup, spearheaded ADOT and AzGFD, identified the Avra Valley linkage zone and Ironwood-Tortolita linkage zone in the 2006 Arizona's Wildlife Linkages Assessment. And most recently, AzGFD's 2012 Pima County Wildlife Connectivity Assessment identified and modeled the Coyote-Ironwood-Tucson Wildlife Linkage Design, including large swaths of land in Avra Valley. Any Interstate 11 alternatives that are located in Avra Valley would also sever the Ironwood-Picacho wildlife linkage.

The study area also encompasses a highly threatened wildlife linkage between the Tucson and Tortolita Mountains and skirts the edge of another highly threatened wildlife linkage between the Tortolita and Santa Catalina Mountains. Both of these wildlife linkages have been the focus of substantial public investment in recent years by the state of Arizona, Pima County, and other local jurisdictions. In March 2016, the Sonoran Desert's first wildlife bridge, funded by Pima County's Regional Transportation Authority, was completed in the Santa Catalina-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage. Smaller wildlife underpasses are planned for Tangerine Road and Silverbell Road within the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage. Impacts to these wildlife linkages in particular must be fully analyzed and mitigated for in the EIS.

In general, severed wildland blocks create isolated wildlife populations, which then become more susceptible to extinction than connected populations. Connectivity is also necessary for wildlife to move across the landscape as they attempt to adapt to rapidly changing habitat conditions driven by climate change. Thus, the impact of a massive linear feature, such as a new highway severing any important movement area for wildlife, cannot be adequately mitigated off-site.

Impacts to Pima County's Conservation Lands System

The EIS must fully analyze direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to Pima County's Conservation Lands System, which is the foundation of the county's federal ITP. All possible alignments of Interstate 11 would impact lands identified in the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan's Conservation Lands System (CLS). The CLS was first adopted in compliance with Arizona state law by Pima County in 2001 (and further amended in 2005) as a part of the Environmental Element of the County's required Comprehensive Land Use Plan. The County convened a Science Technical Advisory Team (STAT), comprised of members of the FWS, AzGFD, National Park Service, professional biologists and natural resource academics. The CLS consists of a STAT-driven, scientifically-based map and set of policy guidelines for Pima County's most biologically-rich lands. These lands include Important Riparian Areas (IRAs), Biological Core Areas, Multiple Use Management Areas, and Species Special Management Areas. Each land category has recommended open space guidelines that are applied when landowners request a rezoning or other discretionary action from the County.

The CLS is a cornerstone of the SDCP and has guided land use and conservation decisions in Pima County since its adoption. We reiterate that implementation of the CLS is a foundational piece of Pima County's federal ITP under Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act. Impacts to Pima County's SDCP and the CLS must be considered when analyzing any potential corridor alignments. All impacts to CLS acreage must be fully mitigated as close to the area of impact as possible, with habitat as good, or better, than that impacted.

Impacts to Riparian Habitat

The EIS must fully analyze direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to riparian habitat within the entire study area. Any potential Interstate 11 alignments, as demonstrated by the maps ADOT displayed at the public meetings, will undoubtedly destroy and/or degrade important, and increasingly rare, riparian habitat. Some 80% of vertebrate species in the arid southwest region are dependent on riparian areas for at least part of their life cycle; over half of these cannot survive without access to riparian areas (Noss and Peters 1995).

The Arizona Partners in Flight Bird Conservation Plan states:

"Riparian woodlands comprise a very limited geographical area that is entirely disproportionate to their landscape importance... and immense biological interest (Lowe and Brown 1973). It has been estimated that only 1% of the western United States historically constituted this habitat type, and that 95% of the historic total has been altered or destroyed in the past 100 years (Krueper 1993, 1996). Riparian woodlands are among the most severely threatened habitats within Arizona. Maintenance of existing patches of this habitat, and restoration of mature riparian deciduous forests, should be among the top conservation priorities in the state."²

² http://www.azgfd.gov/pdfs/w_c/partners_flight/APIF%20Conservation%20Plan.1999.Final.pdf

Riparian habitat is valued for its multiple benefits to people as well as wildlife; it protects the natural functions of the floodplains, provides shelter, food, and natural beauty, prevents erosion, protects water quality, and increases groundwater recharge. Riparian habitat contains higher water availability, vegetation density, and biological productivity. Pima County has developed riparian conservation guidelines that make every effort to protect, restore, and enhance on-site the structure and functions of the CLS's IRAs and other riparian systems. Off-site mitigation of riparian resources is a less favorable option and is constrained by the lack of riparian habitat available with which to mitigate. Every effort should be made to avoid, protect, restore, and enhance the structure and functions of riparian areas. The CLS set aside guideline for IRAs is 95% of any given area of impact.

Impacts to at-risk species

The EIS must fully analyze the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to all species or species habitat present in the project area, and especially those classified as federally "endangered" or "threatened," those identified by the state of Arizona [HabiMap](#) as "species of conservation concern or species of economic and recreational importance," and those identified by Pima County and FWS as "vulnerable" under the SDCP. Some of these species include, but are not limited to:

- Aberts towhee
- Bell's vireo
- Western burrowing owl
- Cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl
- Western yellow-billed cuckoo
- Swainson's hawk
- Rufous-winged sparrow
- Giant spotted whiptail
- Pima pineapple cactus
- Nichol turk's head cactus
- California leaf-nosed bat
- Mexican long-tailed bat
- Pale Townsend's big-eared bat
- Lesser long-nosed bat
- Merriam's mouse
- Jaguar
- Ocelot

Impacts from noise and light pollution

The EIS must thoroughly analyze the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of noise and light pollution from any proposed alignments on resident and migratory wildlife and the wildlife habitats and corridors they utilize. The EIS must also thoroughly analyze any direct, indirect and cumulative impacts to the integrity of the dark skies required for astronomical observatories

such as the two reflective telescopes of the MDM Observatory, the Mount Lemmon Observatory, the Kitt Peak National Observatory, the Steward Observatory, the Fred Lawrence Whipple Observatory, and the Massive Monolithic Telescope, from light pollution, both from vehicle headlights and from reasonably foreseeable future commercial and residential development.

Broader Impacts

Other factors that must be analyzed include how continued climate change will impact Arizona's water resources and projected population growth; public health implications; environmental impacts; and long-term impacts on local and regional land-use plans.

Finally, the EIS must fully analyze the broader impacts of all alternative alignments. For example, any Interstate 11 alignment through Avra Valley would dramatically increase accessibility and thus encourage commercial and residential development. Such exurban development would result in even more habitat fragmentation, cause local governments to incur large financial responsibilities for new infrastructure costs and maintenance, and force major changes to existing local and regional land-use and zoning designations. Existing land use plans have already identified areas most appropriate for growth as mandated by state law and any new transportation corridors should be appropriately sited within those existing identified growth areas.

Additionally, a cost-benefit analysis of alternative(s) double decking I-19 and/or I-10 should be included in the EIS. This approach could reduce the cost of ROW acquisition and potentially avoid any new impacts in the Avra Valley. However, there would be increased environmental impacts from further fragmentation of the Tucson-Tortolita Mountains wildlife linkage corridor, which could be mitigated by construction of a wildlife crossing structure over I-10, as was recently successfully done on SR 77. The feasibility of such a structure has previously been discussed and accepted in principle by Pima County's RTA Wildlife Linkages Working Group, ADOT, AZ State Land Department, AzGFD, Pima County, Town of Marana, Coalition representatives, and others.

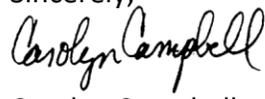
Regardless, in considering a proposed Interstate 11 alignment between Nogales and Wickenburg, we argue that improvements to existing transportation corridors and reducing congestion on existing highways in order to accommodate future traffic will best avoid and minimize environmental impacts. The Coalition questions the purpose and need for a new interstate between Nogales and Wickenburg at all.

2007 Pima County Resolution

In 2007, the Pima County Board of Supervisors passed Resolution No. 2007-343 opposing "the construction of any new highways in or around the County that have the stated purpose of bypassing the existing Interstate 10 as it is believed that the environmental, historic, archaeological, and urban form impacts could not be adequately mitigated." Additionally, the Board called for the expansion of "capacity along Interstate 10 for multiple modes of travel

including, but not limited to, freight, passenger cars, transit, intercity passenger rail, and bicycle, and for beautification of the existing corridor.” We strongly concur with Pima County’s 2007 resolution (attached). Rather than investigating the potential for new transportation corridors in Pima County, we encourage all transportation planners to work to develop multi-modal transportation options within existing transportation corridors.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide scoping comments on the *Interstate 11 Tier 1 Environmental Impact Statement, Nogales to Wickenburg*. We look forward to your analysis and assessment and to commenting further in future phases of the process. If we can be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Campbell
Director

RESOLUTION NO. 2007- 343

**A RESOLUTION OF THE PIMA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS IN
OPPOSITION TO CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERSTATE HIGHWAY LINK
THAT BYPASSES TUCSON AND TRAVERSES PRISTINE AND INVALUABLE
SONORAN DESERT AREAS**

WHEREAS, Pima County's landmark Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan identifies 55 rare local species of concern, whose areas of habitat and corridors between habitat areas already are under threat from development; and

WHEREAS, Pima County has established a Sustainability Program that recognizes the detriment of petroleum-fueled car and truck travel to this effort because of their greenhouse-gas and pollutant emissions, and therefore calls for the County to shift its fleet to use alternative fuels; and

WHEREAS, since 1974 Pima County has bought more than 45,000 acres of land and assumed grazing leases on 86,000 acres for open-space and wildlife habitat preservation, and to mitigate impacts from development; and

WHEREAS, Pima County updated its Riparian Mitigation Ordinance in 2005 to avoid and minimize impacts to riparian vegetation along local washes; and

WHEREAS, the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) has undertaken the Interstate 10 Phoenix-Tucson Bypass Study to look at alternative routes for new controlled access highways that Interstate 10 cars and trucks could use to bypass the Tucson and Phoenix metropolitan areas; and

WHEREAS, the study has advanced to the point of identifying two alternative routes which impact Pima County; and

WHEREAS, each of the alternatives would degrade the Sonoran Desert, sever wildlife corridors identified by the ADOT-sponsored "Arizona Wildlife Linkages Assessment," impede washes, open new areas to intense residential and commercial development far from existing urban centers, and thus encourage more car and truck travel at time when global warming and air pollution are growing concerns; and

WHEREAS, one of the alternatives would traverse the San Pedro River Valley impacting both Cochise County and Pima County; and

WHEREAS, the San Pedro River and its valley constitute one of the most biologically diverse and important ecosystems in North America, which also serves as vitally important flyway for hundreds of unique migratory bird species and is a sensitive aquatic and terrestrial wildlife corridor; and

WHEREAS, there are more than 500 known archaeological sites in the San Pedro River Valley, some dating back as much as 12,000 years and some considered sacred to Native American people; and

WHEREAS, a second identified route runs through the Avra Valley, negatively impacting Tucson Mountain Park, Saguaro National Park, Ironwood National Monument, Bureau of Reclamation's Central Arizona Project Canal mitigation area, and important elements of the County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan by slicing through sensitive areas, severing linkages between important habitat areas, and disturbing an unknown number of archeological sites; and

WHEREAS, the cost of building a new controlled-access highway would be enormous, requiring the acquisition of thousands of acres of new rights of way, expenditures on high and rapidly increasing costs of concrete and asphalt, putting a tremendous burden on taxpayers and future highway users; and

WHEREAS, the production of the millions of tons of concrete and asphalt for this massive construction project would cause significant air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions, as would the operation of heavy machinery in the construction process; and

WHEREAS, a new controlled-access highway near or through Pima County on any route, would promote urban sprawl, causing local governments to incur large financial responsibilities for new infrastructure costs and force major changes to existing county land-use and zoning designations; and

WHEREAS, a new controlled-access highway bypass would divert cars and trucks away from existing businesses that are dependent upon commerce generated from traffic on existing highways; and

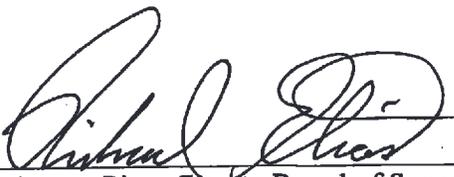
WHEREAS, the state of Arizona could reduce highway traffic congestion, reduce the cost of highway maintenance, and save on the costs of rights of way purchases and concrete and asphalt production and installation – while reducing air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions – by instead expanding capacity and developing multi-modal transportation facilities in existing transportation corridors to sustainably accommodate projected increases in freight while providing for much-needed passenger rail traffic.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Pima County Board of Supervisors:

1. Opposes the construction of any new highways in or around the County that have the stated purpose of bypassing the existing Interstate 10 as it is believed that the environmental, historic, archeological, and urban form impacts could not be adequately mitigated.

2. Supports the continuation of studies relating to this bypass such that the full costs of mitigation measures can be brought forth.
3. Calls upon the office of Governor Janet Napolitano to direct ADOT to undertake studies related to expanding capacity along Interstate 10 for multiple modes of travel including, but not limited to, freight, passenger cars, transit, intercity passenger rail, and bicycle, and for beautification of the existing corridor.

Passed by the Board of Supervisors of Pima County, this 18th day of December, 2007.



Chairman, Pima County Board of Supervisors

ATTEST:



Clerk of the Board

APPROVED AS TO FORM:



Deputy County Attorney