

ENVIRONMENT

Nonprofit gets \$1 million to help conserve southern Arizona's landscapes



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Borderlands Restoration Network, an environmental conservation and restoration nonprofit in southern Arizona received almost \$1 million in federal funding to work alongside numerous agencies for a large-scale three-year project to conserve southern Arizona's landscapes.

Borderlands works to restore watersheds in the Madrean Archipelago, or sky islands, a group of isolated mountain ranges, and helps manage a wildlife preserve near Patagonia. The sky islands encompass more than 30 mountain ranges in southern Arizona in one of the most biodiverse areas on the planet.

Home to many threatened and endangered species, these isolated mountain ranges and valleys which include crucial wildlife migratory habitat with diverse wildlife, including jaguar and ocelot, are particularly vulnerable.

“As the climate crisis worsens, the challenges that the sky islands will face is more dire than some of the other areas partially because they are islands,” Kurt Vaughn, executive director of Borderlands Restoration Network, said of other vulnerable landscapes.

He added that with the hotter high temperatures, more intense rainfall and longer dry spells Arizona is seeing, “the isolated pockets of endemic species and smaller populations will be impacted more.”

Borderlands was awarded \$977,000 on Nov. 10 by the Biden-Harris administration and National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

This is the one of 55 grants aimed at supporting landscape-scale conservation projects in 42 states, three U.S. territories and 14 Tribal Nations.

Funding for this project comes from a pool of \$91 million in grants from multiple federal agencies and the private sector generating \$141.7 million in conservation impact, which includes matching contributions.

In addition to restoring and conserving the land, this funding will allow Borderlands to expand their youth program with more field work opportunities. The Borderlands Earth Care Youth program hires and trains high school students from nearby towns to take part in watershed restoration projects.

Vaughn highlighted the importance of engaging the community, especially youth, in maintaining these projects into the future.

“Creating that connection for people brings about inspiration for them to care,” he said, adding to that connection will inspire people to care about their watershed's wellbeing, and “to get outside to explore and put a new value on their home places.”

The goal is to inspire youth in the area to not only pursue careers in these fields but also stay in the area and prevent future “brain drain” where many young professionals leave rural areas for bigger cities like Tucson.

Borderlands’ three-year grant focuses on projects on the Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape and in Patagonia, Sonoita, Elgin and Canelo.

According to a Borderlands news release, projects include

- thinning over 40 acres of land to reduce wildlife risk
- controlling invasive bullfrogs in the Babocomari River to improve populations of threatened species including the Chiricahua Leopard Frog, Gila Topminnow, Desert Pupfish and Northern Mexican Gartersnake.
- Erecting erosion control structures will be constructed to improve the availability of water allowing for vegetative growth and enhance wildlife habitat.
- Assessing the effects of restoration activities on birds and wildlife.

Vaughn said a big benefit of this grant is the large-scale collaboration, which is necessary to tackling issues caused by the climate crisis.

The grant brings together the Fort Huachuca Sentinel Landscape Partnership, Arizona Department of Forestry and Fire Management, University of Arizona, Tucson Audubon Society, Babocomari Ranch and A to Z Environmental Consulting.

Vaughn said this grant and Borderlands' work will help strengthen the land against climate change.

“Sewing up some of the damage that has been done by past management issues creates better resiliency to future climate change,” he said, which “we know is going to continue happening at last for another hundred years.”

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