SONORAN
INSTITUTE



Where Water Meets Community

Connecting people and ecology

2026 ANNUAL REPORT

Across the Colorado River Basin, Sonoran Institute brings people together to restore rivers, protect ecosystems, and help communities make smarter water and land use decisions.

Budding entomologists explore the acequias of Mission Garden

Message from the CEO and Board Chair

Building a Water-Secure Future Together



Mike Zellner | Chief Executive Officer



Linda Friar | Chair, Board of Directors

Water shapes the future of our communities. Across the Colorado River Basin and the US-Mexico border, diminishing supplies, growing demand, and a changing climate are making the connection between water, people, and place more important than ever.

Sonoran Institute enters this moment with a clear sense of purpose. This year, our Board approved a new four-year strategic plan that builds on 36 years of experience and a fundamental belief: lasting solutions begin with the people who know and depend on these places. The plan charts an ambitious course for restoring rivers and habitat, helping communities secure their water futures, and bringing people together to address challenges no single organization or community can solve alone.

Throughout this report, you will see this commitment at work. In the Colorado River Delta, communities are taking ownership of restored places and becoming their stewards. Along the Santa Cruz River, returning wildlife, groundbreaking research, and growing community participation demonstrate what is possible when people reconnect with their river. Through Growing Water Smart, local leaders are turning collaborative planning into action that strengthens water resilience and reduces demand.

None of this would be possible without the dedication of our staff, the collaboration of our partners, the generosity of our supporters, and, above all, the communities whose leadership and commitment bring this work to life. We are deeply grateful to everyone who shares in this mission.

We have much to build on—and much more to do. The work ahead will require even greater collaboration and commitment. Our new strategic plan is both a roadmap and an invitation—to our partners, donors, communities, and friends—to join us in shaping what comes next. Together, we can restore our rivers, strengthen our communities, and build a more water-secure future.

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Colorado River Delta

Restoring Nature, Building Community

People are enjoying drinks, laughter, and friendly wagers. It is a scene familiar at any golf course, but this tidy 9-holer is designed with dirt and gravel instead of grass. It is also the centerpiece of our Camino Real restoration site, one of four community spaces completed through our multiyear Mexicali Fluye project to restore three miles of polluted urban drains in Mexicali.

When clearing the site, we quickly learned that golf is a way of life here. A nearby course has employed generations of residents, and neighbors were using the site to hit golf balls amid the debris. So, we worked with them to create the space they wanted. Along with walkways, birdwatching station, fencing, and restored wetland, the community now has its own course—with Mexicali Fluye's logo on its pin flags. Its "Dirt Golf" tournaments have even gone viral on social media.

"This wasn't in our plans, but it is exactly the kind of engagement we hope for," says Enrique Villegas, Colorado River Delta Program director. "We cleaned the site, and the community took charge." Neighbors have planted trees and installed trash containers, signaling ongoing stewardship.

For more than 20 years, our Colorado River Delta program has demonstrated that where water and community meet, people and the environment thrive. While future water deliveries to the Colorado River channel remain uncertain, we are encouraged by what we see on the ground: communities enjoying and caring for restoration sites, new partners addressing water challenges, and the next generation discovering a role in conservation.

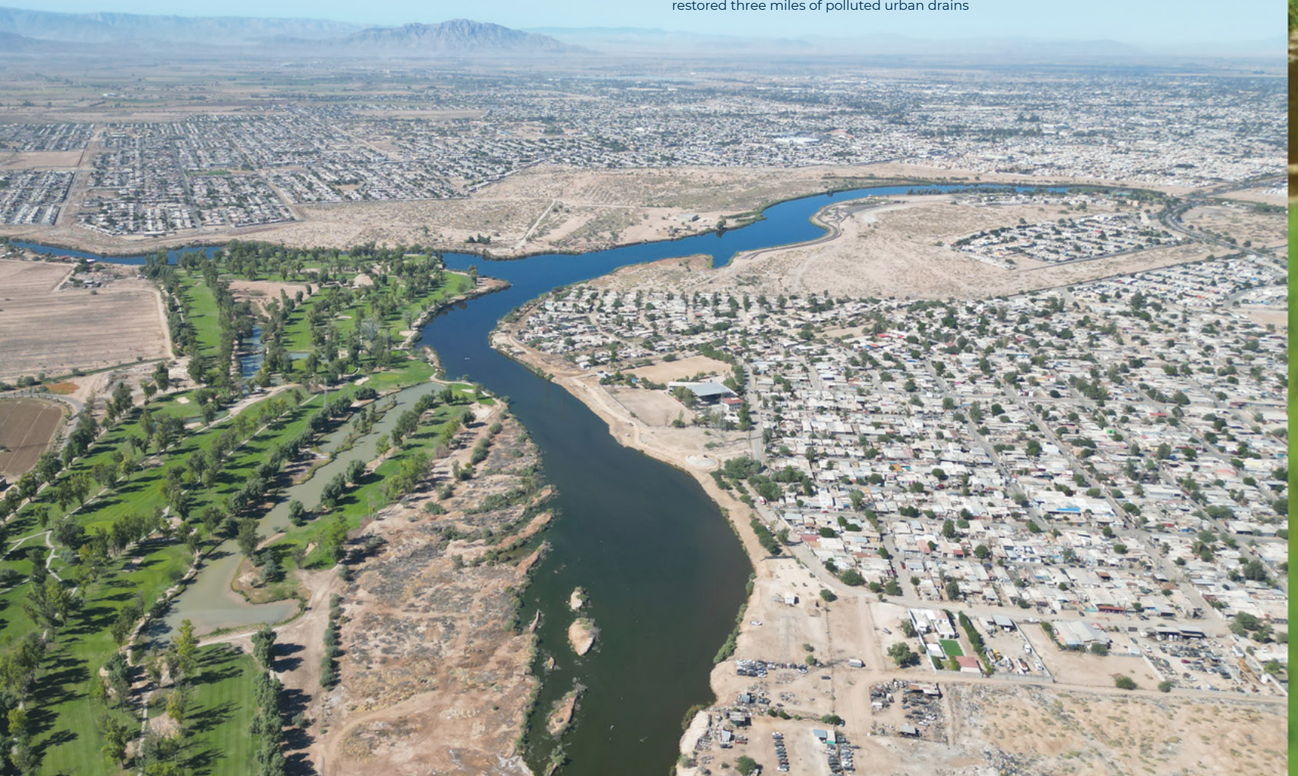


Mexicali Fluye staff and community members enjoy the new "dirt golf" course at the Camino Real restoration site

In a milestone for our partnership in the Raise the River coalition, we have convened an advisory board of Mexicali Valley business leaders to collaborate on regional water issues. In the upper estuary, a new partnership with the Federal Biosphere Reserve builds on our years of monitoring and technical expertise. With the local Cucapá community doing the restoration work, the project combines economic opportunity with improved water flow for marine life.

"With these projects and others, we are seeing the fruits of our efforts in the Delta," Enrique says.

Aerial view of the New River in Mexicali, where our Mexicali Fluye program has restored three miles of polluted urban drains





Dragonfly enthusiasts search for species along the Santa Cruz River during September's Dragonfly Festival

Santa Cruz River

A Living River Inspires Action

From bug sightings to groundbreaking research and creative trash cleanups, our Santa Cruz River Program is reaching new heights in connecting the community to the river.

"The work our program has done this year has informed, empowered, and motivated our community to get involved and become stewards of the river in a way we haven't seen before," says Luke Cole, Santa Cruz River Program director.

The momentum shift reflects a change in how people view the river, Luke says. People are excited to discover what 17 years of clean water in the river means to their community: the resurgence of long-absent species like dragonflies, fireflies, mountain lions, bears, and jaguars. They are also realizing that, by recharging groundwater supplies, water flowing in the river today becomes their water reserve for the future.

Our annual *Living River* reports are helping fuel that growing awareness. "These fact-based reports on river conditions, restoration activities, and river-related events steer our community to engage with the river and guide our in-person outreach," Luke says.

We feel the buzz. Our Dragonfly festival, now a month-long celebration, drew capacity crowds. Activities included a "bioblitz" to track dragonfly sightings, river tours, "Bugs & Bites" lecture at a Tucson restaurant, family science and arts workshop, and the new "Sonoran Sashay," putting the *drag* in the Dragonfly Festival.

Our river trash cleanups, featuring food trucks, prizes, and raffles, are already a party, and this year we added a relay race. At our inaugural Rio Relay, racers and volunteers pulled more than 2,000 pounds of trash from a five-kilometer stretch of the river in Tucson, and then celebrated at a local brewery.

Always underlying our festive events is the serious research we conduct to improve the river's health and resiliency. The recently released *Santa Cruz River Management Plan* and an accompanying economic study create an unprecedented roadmap to further restoration in the Nogales stretch. Research by our University of Arizona interns resulted in the installation of three river trash traps along the river, two of which are the first of their kind in Tucson.

The 18th annual Santa Cruz River Research Days conference saw its second-largest attendance as we celebrated 25 years of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan. Echoing the growing engagement we've seen elsewhere, 66 percent of the 143 attendees were first-time participants. As more people discover the Santa Cruz River, they are also discovering that they have a role in its future.

Mexicali & The Delta



6,000

tons of trash and invasive vegetation removed
5443108 kg

18 *Sábados familiares* at Laguna Grande

90 attendees



8 dragonfly species at Laguna Grande



253 native tree species planted

129 bird species
registered at camera-trap records



Santa Cruz River



7,296

lbs of trash removed

480
people



16,839

A Living River reports

total copies distributed

33
dragonfly and damselfly species

>5,500
observed individuals



8 species of fish
(only one native)

3,249
observed individuals



1000
participants

including reps from over 188 municipalities, counties, and water and flood control districts in the Southwestern US and Northern Mexico

137
communities



Participants at Growing Water Smart workshops discuss ways forward with their water plan

Lincoln Institute of Land Policy Water Planning and Impact program director, Kristen Keener Busby, presents at a Growing Water Smart Workshop

Growing Water Smart

Connection Fosters Confidence and Hope

Across the Colorado River Basin, communities face diminishing water supplies, growing demand, and increasing climate risks. For nine years, our Growing Water Smart (GWS) program has been building the partnerships, experience, and approaches communities need to meet this moment. In partnership with the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, a center of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, GWS brings local leaders together to better integrate water and land-use planning and turn collaboration into action that strengthens water resilience and reduces water demand.

Results from this approach were highlighted this year in the international peer-reviewed journal *Water*, which showcased three GWS alumni success stories: the San Luis Valley in Colorado, the Verde Watershed in Arizona, and the sister cities of Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora, along the US-Mexico border. In each case, teams collaborated across disciplines and borders to increase regional water security—through the first-ever intergovernmental agreement regarding water exports in the San Luis Valley, through shared water solutions that build capacity and reduce costs for rural communities in the Verde Watershed, and through a binational workshop between the cities of Douglas and Agua Prieta that resulted in more efficient use of high-quality effluent flows as an additional water supply.

"They were three different groups, in different settings, with different stakeholders facing a range of threats to their water supplies," says Senior Director of Programs Francisco Zamora. "But through our program, they all came away with tangible solutions to strengthen water resilience in their communities."

Publication in an international peer-reviewed journal validates the Growing Water Smart approach at a time when collaborative water planning has never been more important.

With this in mind, we are deepening our focus on water security and risk managment through a new program being developed in partnership with the Colorado Water Conservation Board. The Water Secure Communities program is directly supporting the implementation of the Colorado Water Plan by creating actionable, community-driven roadmaps for long-term water security, tailored to the unique water needs of diverse regions across the state.

"Water Secure Communities will help communities be better equipped and empowered to adapt to diminishing water supplies, growing demands, and climate risks," Francisco continues. After nearly a decade of helping communities plan smarter for water, Sonoran Institute is building on that experience to help them prepare for an increasingly uncertain water future.

Water Secure Communities will help communities be better equipped and empowered to adapt to diminishing water supplies, growing demands, and climate risks.

FRANCISCO ZAMORA | Senior Director of Programs

Participants of the 2026 Arizona Growing Water Workshop



27
workshops

Thank You to Our Donors

We are grateful to all our donors, partners, and volunteers. With your support the Sonoran Institute continues to make a positive impact throughout the Colorado River Basin.

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Dragonfly Cakes
Madeline Friberg-Landon
Rocío Guzmán
Chris Rife
Nico Viquesney
Cox Enterprises
Stormwater Systems

In Memory

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Pedro Joab Aguirre
Jae Hall
Suzanne Shields

In Honor

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Barbara Green
Nyda Jones-Church
Dan Kimball
Anna Murveit
Loretta Pineda
Diane Sipe
Jill Tidman
Grace Wofford
Michael Zellner



Financial Summary

Revenue and Support

Contributions	$ 1,681,800
Foundation Grants	$ 775,575
Government Grants	$ 3,809,169
Contract Income	$ 354,635
Other Income	$ 210,917
Total Revenue and Support	**$ 6,832,096**

Expenses

Programs US	$ 2,372,392
Programs MEX	$ 2,710,608
Administration	$ 433,369
Fundraising & Marketing	$ 434,773
Total Expenses	**$ 5,951,142**

Reporting based on audited FY26 results. A copy of the audit will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available.

You can make an impact!

Here are a few ways you can make a difference for future generations:

Donate
For easy access, we have included a remittance envelope. Or, give online at sonoraninstitute.org.

Attend Our Events
You'll have fun, meet great people, and learn more about our important work.

Follow Us on Social Media
We're on: Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Spread our news with your friends and family
The more who hear about us, the greater our impact. Sign up for our monthly newsletter on our website.

Our Mission
The Sonoran Institute's mission is to connect people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them.

Our Vision
We envision a future when people and nature flourish together, where urban and agricultural communities across the US, Mexico, and Tribal nations use water wisely, adapt to change, and sustain living rivers and landscapes for generations to come.

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