



In this edition of the **Sonoran Post**, we build new community resiliency through workshops, infrastructures, and community art. Conservation work takes many forms, and through our 35 years we've had the privilege of exploring all ways that work can take shape. You can help us celebrate our 35th anniversary [Donate today!](#)

## VERDE VALLEY GROWS WATER SMART

This January, we held our first regional Growing Water Smart workshop of the year in Clarkdale, Arizona. Congratulations to Camp Verde, Chino Valley, Clarkdale, Jerome, Prescott Valley, and Yavapai County for bringing your expertise and enthusiasm to planning for a more resilient Verde River Watershed!

Looking to February, our Metrics Program partner, the Brendle Group, will present to the Water Wise Development Coalition's quarterly webinar on the importance of process and impact data in integrating water resources into land-use planning.

We are hosting a West Slope Growing Water Smart workshop for communities within the Colorado River District and Southwestern Water Conservation District service areas. The workshop will take place in Montrose, Colorado, from April 28–30. [Applications are due by February 28.](#)



## INFRASTRUCTURE AND IRRIGATION IMPROVEMENTS WITH THE IBWC

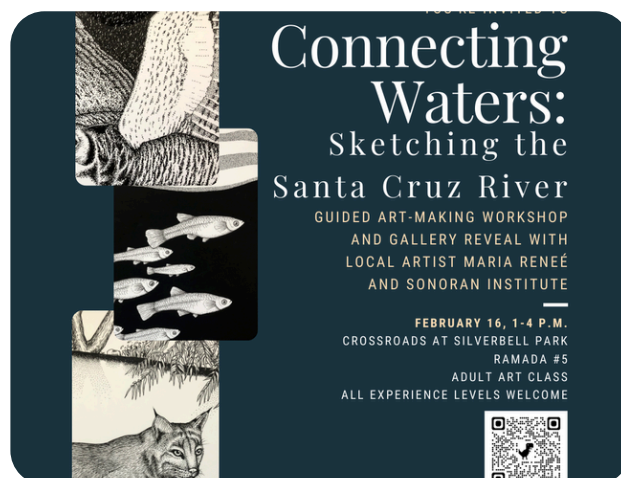
In January 2025, the Mexicali team cemented their work on the water saving irrigation improvements with the main irrigation canal of our Colorado River (CORI) restoration site completed. The work involved the concrete lining of 526 meters (1,725 feet) of the main channel that distributes irrigation at our restoration site, estimated to save over 102,800 cubic meters (27,156,900 gallons) of water.

On January 14, the Mexicali team conducted a tour with International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC) personnel to point out the excess discharges of residual water that our team has detected in the Colector del Norte Drain as part of the activities that promote quality improvement from the Mexicali Fluye project.

## SKETCHING THE SANTA CRUZ

Sonoran Institute's Santa Cruz River program, in collaboration with the University of Arizona and numerous community partners, has been awarded an America the Beautiful Challenge grant for \$706,000 from The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation! This two-year funding will enable the Sonoran Institute to lead community engagement efforts along the Santa Cruz River corridor, supporting the establishment of the [Santa Cruz River Urban National Wildlife Refuge](#). Stay connected with the Sonoran Institute for updates on upcoming community events where you can contribute your insights and ideas for the river's future.

On February 16 from 1–4 p.m., Sonoran Institute and artist-ecologist Maria Renée will host "[Connecting Waters: Sketching the Santa Cruz River](#)" at Crossroads at Silverbell Park, Ramada #5. This workshop welcomes all skill levels, provides basic materials, and invites participants to submit a drawing for future community use.



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## 35 YEARS OF CONSERVATION - CONNECTING POLICY AND COMMUNITIES

For 35 years, Sonoran Institute has worked to secure water resources, protect critical environments, and empower communities to ensure a resilient water future. In building on this community centered work, we launched our Growing Water Smart initiative in 2017 with the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy. Since then, we've worked with over 900 planners, elected officials, and water resource managers across the Colorado River basin states. Growing Water Smart works with water and land-use planners to establish plans catered to each communities needs and break down silos, as water connects us all.

In 2021, the Growing Water Smart initiative expanded to evaluate shared water and land use challenges affecting communities along the U.S.-Mexico border. We began by hosting Listening Sessions, where we interviewed experts and locals in key sister city regions, then in 2024, we conducted the first workshop in Ambos, Nogales and second one in November 2024 in Mexicali, Baja California.

Both cities are now eligible for Technical Assistance Grants and have a greater shared vision for their water futures.

As we expanded West, we began our work with California in the summer of 2023. In partnership with the University of Redlands, San Bernardino Valley Municipal Water District, Water Education for Latino Leaders, CivicWell, Stantec and Hunter Industries, we've lead two workshops to begin addressing key issues faced by the state. By 2050 the population of California is estimated to reach 50 million but the state is facing problems of prolonged drought to shifting climate patterns. Through the GWS workshops we envision that every drop counts, communities work together, and local leaders are empowered to adopt land use plans and policies that support water resilience.

**You can help us continue this work and more at our 35th anniversary celebrations in Arizona, Colorado, and Mexicali.**



## SONORAN INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP HIGHLIGHT: Angela Melendez

When asked what Angela likes to do, she responds simply by saying that she is a cardboard architect, and she makes maps. She works with computers to manipulate zeros and ones into

photos, vectors, tables and instructions. In that process, a lot of information about different landscapes is abstracted and portrayed. And that is the key, her life is the landscapes, and she lives to remember them, recognize them, imagine them, draw them and paint them, but, above all, she lives to be part of a great team that reinvents them by bringing the landscapes to life.

At Sonoran Institute, Angela coordinates the Geographic Information Systems department, where she joins the research and monitoring efforts of the organization through the collection, administration, analysis and visualization of data. One of the most fun and interesting projects she has participated in was developing and establishing methodologies to determine the health of vegetation in restoration sites using unmanned aerial vehicles, better known as drones. Outside of work she loves music, painting, and advocating for social and environmental justice.



## A MESSAGE FROM CEO MIKE ZELLNER

As we embark on another year of impactful work, I am excited to share our recent successes and upcoming initiatives that continue to drive our mission forward.

In January, we kicked off the first Growing Water Smart regional workshop of the year in Clarkdale, Arizona, bringing together six communities to strengthen watershed resilience in the Verde Valley. Looking ahead, we are preparing for our West Slope Growing Water Smart workshop in Montrose, Colorado, supporting communities in the Colorado River District and Southwestern Water Conservation District.

In Mexico, our Mexicali team completed critical water-saving improvements at our Colorado River (CORI) restoration site, lining 526 meters of irrigation canals to save over 102,800 cubic meters of water annually. We also collaborated with the International Boundary and Water Commission to address excess wastewater discharges in the region.

Our Santa Cruz River program with the University of Arizona and partners were awarded the America the Beautiful Challenge grant, supporting the establishment of the Santa Cruz River Urban National Wildlife Refuge. Connection to our natural environment takes many forms. On February 16, we're also co-hosting an "Art in the Park" event, "Connecting Waters: Sketching the Santa Cruz River," a community art event with local artist-ecologist Maria Renée.

As we celebrate 35 years of progress, we continue expanding our work into new areas and new geographies like California and the U.S.-Mexico border region. A heartfelt thank you for your help to make this possible.

Together, we are making a difference!

## UPCOMING EVENTS

**FEB 16** **Connecting Waters: Sketching the Santa Cruz River,** Tucson AZ

**FEB 20** **Green Drinks Tucson,** Tucson AZ

**FEB 24** **Santa Cruz River Research Days applications due,** Tucson AZ

**FEB 28** **Colorado Growing Water Smart applications due,** Montrose CO

**MARCH 7** **35th Anniversary,** Tucson AZ

**MARCH 15 -** **Tucson Festival of Books,** Tucson AZ

**MARCH 20** **Green Drinks Tucson,** Tucson AZ

**JUNE 6** **35th Anniversary,** Denver CO

**NOV 7** **35th Anniversary,** Mexicali, MX

At Sonoran Institute, we believe that by connecting people and nature today, we can create a positive future for all. We are dedicated to protecting and restoring the Colorado River Basin, and to ensuring that our communities have access to the water they need to thrive. Join us in our mission to create a sustainable future for the Colorado River Basin and beyond.

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