



In this edition of the **Sonoran Post**, we advanced water and land restoration efforts across Arizona, Colorado, and the U.S.–Mexico border through innovative partnerships, technical assistance grants, and community engagement. You can help us continue these efforts by [Donating today!](#)

GREAT NEWS FOR THE MIDDLE SANTA CRUZ

The Santa Cruz River team has unveiled a science-based plan to restore flows to the [middle Santa Cruz River](#), a historically dry stretch from the Santa Cruz-Pima County line to the southern edge of the Tohono O'odham Nation's San Xavier District, using high-quality treated effluent from the Green Valley Water Reclamation Facility. This approach will increase surface flows, enhancing native vegetation, wildlife habitats, and public access. Supported by the Bureau of Reclamation's WaterSMART program and the Santa Cruz Watershed Collaborative, the project has developed conceptual designs for flow reintroduction. Pima County is advancing permitting processes to implement the initial phase.

This initiative exemplifies how federal investment, and regional collaboration can lead to sustainable, community-supported environmental restoration.



FROM WATER SMART PLANNING TO ACTION!

Imperial County, California was awarded a Growing Water Smart Technical Assistance grant after attending our Mexicali-Calexico workshop in November. Imperial County's Planning and Development Services department will use this grant to update the water element of the county's General Plan to identify key issues, opportunities, and updates and to address cross-border water management practices.

In Colorado, we attended the Colorado Water and Land Use Alliance meeting to discuss housing and water related legislation from the 2025 Colorado Legislative Session. With nearly 70% of Colorado water users living in areas that have participated in our workshops, seeing this work through ensures education meets action to build a resilient future for the state.

Technical Assistance applications are open for our most recent Arizona Growing Water Smart until July 18. The team is preparing for their next Peer Network Webinar, July 22, covering the Bridging the Gap project in Colorado.

MEXICALI INVESTS IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

In May the Mexicali Fluye project made many strides – a workshop to determine the ecological flow of Rio Nuevo and its minimum flow to maintain the drainage system network. The team also lead a tour with community members of Mision del Angel and Comunidad Solidaridad and representatives from California and Mexicali on the importance of the work in Rio Nuevo to the local communities. At the end of the month, Sonoran Institute was awarded stewardship of land by the Environmental Protection Department of Mexicali to create a community park along our project site.

Additionally, our Colorado River Delta Program Director, Enrique Villegas, spoke at an Air Quality Forum presented by Mexicali's Environmental Protection Department on the importance of reforestation efforts along Mexicali's drainage system to aid in offsetting the urban heat island effect faced in the city.

Finally, we welcomed a group of biology students from the Autonomous University of Baja California to Laguna Grande to conduct research on the ecology of riparian ecosystems and the restoration site.



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35 YEARS OF CONSERVATION - CREATING A RESILIENT WEST

Since 2005, we have worked with the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy's Babbitt Center of Land and Water Policy on cutting-edge land use issues and scenario planning. Together, we developed the Growing Water Smart program in 2015. First on our agenda was working with Babbitt Center to create a strategic framework guide that could be adapted to different communities within the watershed basin. In 2017, we hosted the first workshop in Keystone, Colorado.

These critical workshops help communities learn on how to communicate, involve the public, plan, and make policies so they can protect water resources and plan for their future. Current workshops are organized in Arizona, Colorado, California, Utah and US/Mexico border areas.

To date, we have led 25 workshops with over 1000 participants in over 150 cities, counties, and towns while funding 42 Technical Assistance Projects to turn these workshops into tangible results.

In just Colorado alone, Growing Water Smart workshops have trained local leaders from communities that serve nearly 70% of Colorado's population, helping them develop practical plans to better coordinate water management with land use planning.

This level of work would not be possible without our dedicated partners sharing their expertise on land and water policy and management. On June 6, 2025, we met in Denver to celebrate our 35th anniversary and honor those partners who make this work possible. It was a moment to reflect on the impact we've made together and to thank those who have supported us over the decades. Here's to the next 35 years of collaboration, conservation, and community-driven change.

[You can help us continue this work and more at our 35th anniversary celebration on November 7th, 2025 in Mexicali.](#)

SONORAN INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP HIGHLIGHT: Karina Velderrain

Karina Velderrain Ramos has been with the Sonoran Institute in October of 2023 as an administrative coordinator. Originally from Navoja Sonora, she received her degree in public accounting from the University of Sonora. She has 14 years' experience at Almatier Hospital in Mexicali where she worked in customer service and insurance collections, working with different organizations and government institutions. Karina enjoys going for hikes and strolls with her two children, family gatherings and loves making flour tortillas and cooking for her loved ones.



A MESSAGE FROM CEO MIKE ZELLNER

Dear colleagues and partners,

This quarter demonstrates the power of science, collaboration, and commitment. Our Santa Cruz River team has released a science-based plan to restore flows to the Middle Santa Cruz River using reclaimed water from the Green Valley facility. With federal WaterSMART support and county leadership, permits for the first phase are already moving—promising refreshed corridors and habitats.

Across the region, momentum is equally strong. California's Imperial County earned a Growing Water Smart technical-assistance grant after our Mexicali-Calexico workshop and will now weave cross-border water stewardship into its General Plan. In Colorado we met with the Water & Land Use Alliance to translate workshop insights into policy during the 2025 session.

Since launching the first Growing Water Smart workshop in 2017, we have convened 25 workshops, trained 1,000 leaders in 150 jurisdictions, and catalyzed 42 technical-assistance projects.

Our Mexicali Fluye team defined ecological flow targets for Río Nuevo, led community tours, and adopted land for a riverside park, while Director Enrique Villegas highlighted reforestation's role in cooling the city at Mexicali's Air Quality Forum. We also welcomed biology students from UABC to Laguna Grande to deepen research partnerships.

Thank you for celebrating our 35th anniversary in Denver—and please join us for the continuation in Mexicali. Together, and with colleagues like Karina Velderrain Ramos, we will shape the next 35 years of resilient, community-driven change.



UPCOMING EVENTS

JUNE 19 [Green Drinks Tucson](#), Tucson AZ

JUNE 22 [Peer Network Webinar](#), online

JULY 17 [Green Drinks Tucson](#), Tucson AZ

AUG 21 [Green Drinks Tucson](#), Tucson AZ

SEPTEMBER [Santa Cruz River Dragonfly Festival](#), Tucson AZ

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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