

The SONORAN POST

January 2026



In this edition of the **Sonoran Post**, we reflect on a pivotal moment for the Colorado River Basin, highlighting our ongoing efforts to shape its future through collaboration, innovation, and impactful leadership. You can help us continue these efforts by [Donating today!](#)

RECONNECTING THE COLORADO RIVER DELTA

In the Colorado River Delta, we continue to demonstrate how binational collaboration, science, and community leadership can restore landscapes once thought lost.

In 2026, flowing water will once again reconnect the Colorado River to the sea. This achievement carries profound ecological meaning and deep cultural resonance. At the same time, the Mexicali Fluye initiative will celebrate completion of a three-mile pilot project and begin the next steps to reimagine all 40 miles of Mexicali's irrigation canals. Together, these milestones show what is possible when urban water infrastructure is designed to serve people, nature, and climate resilience.

Our work in the Delta is sustained by strong community engagement, from family-oriented environmental education programming and neighborhood events to hands-on stewardship through tree planting, clean-ups, and long-term monitoring. These efforts ensure restoration benefits not only the wildlife and local ecology, but enduring social improvement as well.



ADVANCING A LIVING SANTA CRUZ RIVER

Along the Santa Cruz River in southern Arizona, we are translating vision into reality through tangible improvements that residents can see and experience.

This year, new trash trap installations will significantly reduce pollution in the river, while the completion of a comprehensive benefits study and conservation plan will provide a clear roadmap for future investment and protection. Community events, Santa Cruz River Research Days, Dragonfly Festival, publications, and citizen science continue to deepen public connection to the river and reinforce its value as a living asset for Tucson and the region.

BUILDING WATER-SMART COMMUNITIES ACROSS THE WEST

Through our Growing Water Smart program, the Sonoran Institute, together with our partner Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, a division of the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy, is helping communities align land use, housing, and water use planning, an essential strategy in an era of climate uncertainty.

In the year ahead, we will expand this work by launching the next phase of Growing Water Smart workshops, integrating the Water Secure Communities program framework in Colorado, and delivering trainings across Arizona and Colorado. We will also complete a new Metrics Guidebook for California and continue to grow our peer-to-peer learning network of more than 600 practitioners. These efforts empower local leaders to make informed, durable decisions that support long-term water security.



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A PIVOTAL YEAR FOR THE SONORAN INSTITUTE

The year ahead arrives at a defining moment for the Colorado River Basin and the communities that depend on it. Across the Basin, seven U.S. states, 30 Tribal Nations, and Mexico are working toward a new agreement to guide the future management of the Colorado River, alongside a new U.S.–Mexico Minute governing flows to the Colorado River Delta. These negotiations will shape water security, ecosystems, and livelihoods for generations.

Against this backdrop, the Sonoran Institute enters 2026 with both urgency and optimism. While we are developing a new Strategic Plan that will launch in July 2026 and guide our work through 2030, the year immediately ahead is already rich with action, progress, and visible impact on the ground.

Our progress is made possible by a vibrant community of supporters and partners. In 2026, we will deepen these relationships through donor engagement events and field tours in Arizona, Colorado, and Mexico; our annual Arizona Gives Day campaign; Hummingbird Circle gatherings; and ongoing public events such as Green Drinks Tucson.

We will also share our impact broadly through our Annual Report and year-end communications—telling the story of how collaborative, place-based solutions are shaping a more resilient future for the Southwest.

As the Colorado River Basin faces historic decisions, the Sonoran Institute is focused on what we do best: advancing practical solutions, building trust across borders and sectors, and demonstrating that healthy rivers and thriving communities go hand in hand.

The year ahead is not just about responding to change—it is about helping lead it. With strong partners, engaged communities, and a clear vision, we are laying the groundwork for a more sustainable, equitable, and water-secure future.



SONORAN INSTITUTE LEADERSHIP HIGHLIGHT: John Shepard

John celebrated 30 years with Sonoran Institute this November! He currently acts as our senior advisor and leads the Institute's One Basin Program, which focuses on policies that ensure the Colorado River is managed in a more holistic, inclusive, and adaptive fashion to benefit communities and wildlife. John also advises staff in program development and assists with organization-wide fundraising. Over the years, John has lead and implemented many of our endeavors

including a renewable energy program, training programs on community land-use planning for rural western county commissioners, integrating conservation into master-planned communities for developers, and establishing Building from the Best of Tucson, a project that promotes development consistent with Tucson's building traditions and appropriate for a desert community.



A MESSAGE FROM CEO MIKE ZELLNER

As we enter 2026, the Colorado River Basin stands at a pivotal moment. Seven U.S. states, 30 Tribal Nations, and Mexico are working together on a new agreement to guide the future management of this vital water source. These negotiations will shape the region's water security, ecosystems, and livelihoods for generations to come. In this crucial period, the Sonoran Institute approaches the future with both urgency and optimism.

This year, as we prepare to launch our new Strategic Plan in July 2026, we are already seeing meaningful progress and tangible impact on the ground. Our work continues to advance policies that promote more holistic, inclusive, and adaptive management of the Colorado River. At the heart of our efforts are the Growing Water Smart, Santa Cruz River, Colorado River Delta, and One Basin Programs. With senior leadership like John Shepard, who celebrated 30 years with Sonoran Institute in November, we are reminded that this work takes time, partnerships, and community focused strategy.

As we move forward, the Sonoran Institute remains committed to creating lasting solutions for the Colorado River and its communities. We look ahead with a clear focus on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead, knowing that our work today will help secure a more sustainable and resilient future for all.

UPCOMING EVENTS

- JAN 27** **Virtual Talk: How Trash helps us shape the future of a Santa Cruz River Refuge**, online
- FEB 7** **Santa Cruz River Cleanup**, Santa Cruz County, AZ
- FEB 19** **Green Drinks Tucson**, Tucson, AZ
- FEB 26** **Santa Cruz River Research Days Abstracts Due**, online
- FEB 28** **Days of Connection**, Tucson, AZ
- MARCH 21** **Days of Connection**, Tucson, AZ
- APRIL 18** **Rio Relay 5k trash cleanup**, Tucson, AZ
- APRIL 28 - 30** **Santa Cruz River Research Days**, Tucson, AZ and online

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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