

# Arizona State Trust Lands Conservation Profile: Observatory Mesa

Sonoran Institute, in collaboration with conservation groups across Arizona and with funding from the Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust, has assembled state trust lands suitable for conservation into a single database. The resulting profiles focus on conservation values. Political values are left for another day.



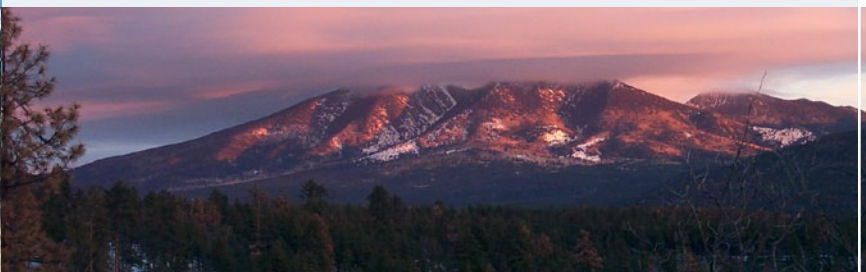
Shaping the Future of the West

## NATURAL CONNECTIONS

The scenic beauty of Observatory Mesa correlates directly to its location between the San Francisco Peaks and the Mogollon Rim. Its 7,500-foot elevation provides a 360-degree panoramic view unaffected by the development that lies just below its edge. The side canyons, forest, grasslands, and pockets of different vegetation fostered by varied soils, exposure, and underground moisture produce seasonal changes of scenic beauty that enhance the panorama.

All that could change with a simple auction by the Arizona State Land Department (ASLD) or land exchange by the U.S. Forest Service. Development pressure from Flagstaff could encroach upon the area, threatening its beauty and the economic driver that is Lowell Observatory.

Each section of state land on Observatory Mesa contains an intermittent stream that flows into the Rio de Flag. A conservation designation for these lands would support the overall integrity of the fragile Rio de Flag watershed. Several of the water tanks on the Mesa hold water after several dry years, serving both cattle grazers and wildlife. Tunnel Springs, which was developed by the railroad for its steam engines in Section 18, was continually full of water until 1995; it is believed that new development and greater use of the aquifer are responsible for the termination of the flow.

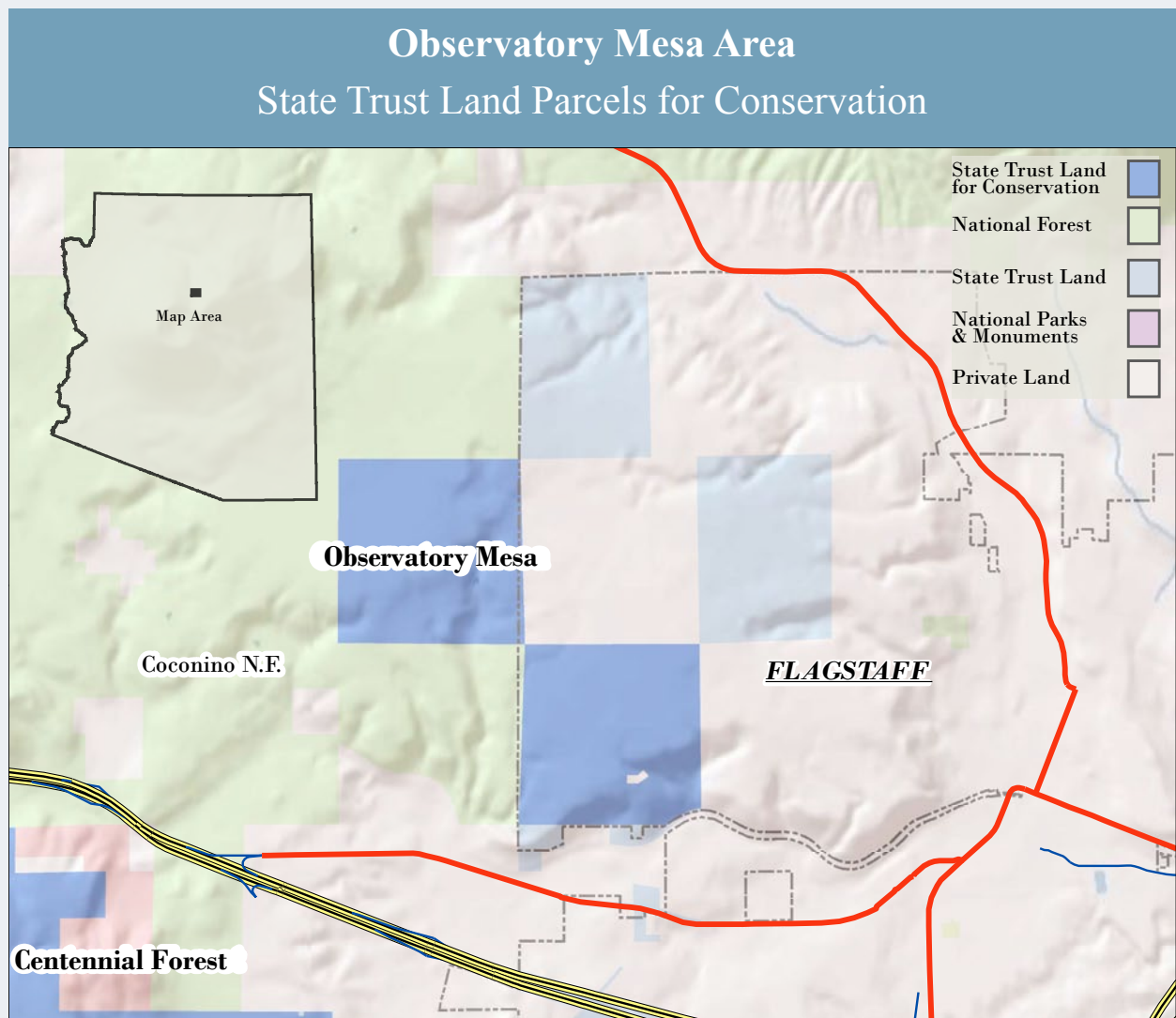


# LOCATION

## Observatory Mesa

Observatory Mesa is a flat-topped volcanic landform immediately west of Flagstaff and southwest of the San Francisco Peaks. Three drainage systems, the Rio de Flag to the north and east, the Clay Avenue Wash to the south, and Volunteer Wash to the west follow the base of the Mesa. The Rio de Flag is a tributary of the San Francisco Wash, which in turn feeds into the Little Colorado River.

Land tenure on Observatory Mesa is state trust land intermixed with U.S. Forest Service land in a checkerboard pattern with additional parcels of private land. State trust lands make up about 2,300 acres of the 7,500-acre Mesa top. Lowell Observatory, preserved by an 1894 Act of Congress, is the largest parcel of private land on Observatory Mesa. It is one of the oldest observatories in the United States.





## PROPOSED CONSERVATION SOLUTION

### Observatory Mesa

The Flagstaff Area Open Spaces and Greenways Plan was a collaborative effort by the U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Arizona State Land Department, Coconino County, and the City of Flagstaff. The Plan was developed in order to facilitate better land use planning in conjunction with the May 2001 Regional Land Use and Transportation Plan adopted by voters. The community envisioned conservation of land within Observatory Mesa as open space in order to preserve the scenic beauty and wildlife habitat contained within the Mesa. Preservation of land and dark skies around Lowell Observatory will help retain the economic impact of its unique research mission.

All of the state trust land sections have spectacular views of the San Francisco Peaks. In November, 2004, the City of Flagstaff submitted an Arizona Preserve Initiative petition to conserve these lands by purchasing state trust lands financed through a bond measure approved by voters. The application is still pending.



## ARIZONA STATE TRUST LAND

In 1912, the federal government gave 10.5 million acres of state trust lands to the new state of Arizona. These lands are not owned by the state, but are held in trust for the benefit of the state's school system and several other beneficiaries.

Proceeds from the sale or lease of these lands generated about \$50 million for the beneficiaries in 2010. The Arizona State Land Department, in its role as trustee for the beneficiaries, is constitutionally obligated to seek maximum financial return for trust lands.

This requirement has complicated efforts to preserve state trust land for recreational use and environmental protection. The state cannot simply turn a parcel of trust land into a park or nature preserve since it is required to receive full market value for the land. All state trust land is subject to sale or lease to the highest bidder. Preservation of trust land requires sustained community input coupled with legislative action.



# STATE TRUST LAND CONSERVATION

## Collaborating Partners

The Grand Canyon Trust has a long history of helping to protect state lands in northern Arizona through collaborative planning efforts and open space initiatives.

The Nina Mason Pulliam Charitable Trust seeks to help people in need, especially women, children and families; to protect animals and nature; and to enrich community life in the metropolitan areas of Indianapolis and Phoenix.

The Sonoran Institute inspires and enables community decisions and public policies that respect the land and people of western North America. Facing rapid change, communities in the West value their natural and cultural resources, which support resilient environmental and economic systems. Founded in 1990, the Sonoran Institute helps communities conserve and restore those resources and manage growth and change through collaboration, civil dialogue, sound information, practical solutions and big-picture thinking. The Sonoran Institute is a nonprofit organization with offices in Tucson and Phoenix, Arizona; Bozeman, Montana; Glenwood Springs, Colorado; Sheridan, Wyoming; Twentynine Palms, California; and Mexicali, Baja California, Mexico.



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