

The BUGLE

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Bringing Back Tavaschi Marsh

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Staff Reporter

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The first Americans certainly chose the site of Tuzigoot, not simply because of location at the side of the abundant [Verde River](#), but also because of the springs that trickle pure water from the sandstone ridge nearby.

Generations after the natives abandoned the site and their Northern Arizona home, men of a different color had a different purpose: to drain the marsh to raise crops and pasture cattle.

Now another 90 years on, the marsh continues its persistent struggle for life, fighting against man's attempts to tame it.

However, the current tenants hope to give the now-rare marsh a new vitality and provide visitors expanded access to marshlands.

The proposal is part of a long-forged plan to improve the habitat and better manage the marshlands for a broader spectrum of natural transition zones between cattails and the mesquite Bosque.

In order to proceed, the federal government requires the airing of an environmental assessment through the NEPA process, now under way.

Well before the National Park Service gained control of the marsh in 2005, homesteaders saw the area as a wealth of fertile ground with an abundance of water, if they could just find a method of draining some of it back into the Verde River.

The Tuzigoot National Monument wants to reverse engineer that plan.

The preferred alternative proposes to enhance the marsh habitat through long-term adaptive



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hydrologic management through the construction of water control structure and a water conveyance channel designed to allow fluctuation of water levels in the marsh's northern section. The preferred alternative also proposes, for visitor enjoyment, creating a loop trail system, a boardwalk and viewing platform in addition to upgrading the footbridge in the marsh.

In addition to a do-nothing approach, the federal agency also has studied improving the marsh by managing the cattails or by allowing beavers to do their work.

William Stoutamire, a graduate history student at ASU, prepared a comprehensive history of the area from the time of early Anglo pioneer and Verde Valley settler L.A. Hawkins that, in the 1860s, the Verde River "bottom was from one-half to one mile wide, and was covered with a dense forest of trees, with thick underbrush, which it was very difficult to even get through on foot, every half mile or mile there would be a beaver dam."

The dense forest would no longer be present, but the beaver dams and cattails would become an ever-present obstacle for the marsh throughout the modern era,



VVN/Jon Hutchinson
Sharon Kim, chief of Natural Resources for North Central Arizona Monuments, looks out over Tavasci Marsh near Clarkdale.

Remarkably, the same man who originally held one of the richest claims in Jerome also was one of the earliest settlers in the marsh around the crumbled Sinagua ruin.

Hawkins writes that early prospector Morris Andrew Ruffner, who, after selling his squatter's rights in the marsh to Hawkins's father for \$300, established the Eureka claim in Jerome, which would one day become a foundation of W.A. Clark's United Verde Copper holdings.

While much of the recorded history details the efforts of the Tavasci family and partners to drain and level the marsh as a dairy, and later, cattle ranch, Sharon Kim, chief of Natural Resources, North Central Arizona Monuments, says it is likely that early settlers had similar objectives.

The land was originally held by families with the names Hawkins, Wilber, O'Shea, McKim and Brewer.

A cooperative effort between the settlers and the United Verde Copper Company allowed for the creation of the Allen or Brewer tunnel with a dam to divert Verde River water to irrigate the farmland being developed from the marsh.

John Tavasci Sr. told researchers that at least one drainage ditch existed called the Middle Ditch before his family settled the land in 1924.

A number of people had settled on the land individually, but eventually the United Verde mine administration, under the ownership of Sen. W.A. Clark sought to control more of the land below Jerome and build a new smelter. The mine eventually acquired 2,000 acres developed Peck's Lake and a 9-hole golf course that would eventually become a recreational amenity for the mine and smelter workers.

Sen. Clark's son, Charles W. Clark, saw the need for the mining community to provide workers with fresh milk and in 1928 provided a 10-year lease to the Paul Tavasci family and partners Guido Marianna and Nat Rezzonico as well as the capital to build homes and equipment, according to the Stoutamire history.

The resulting Clarkdale Dairy continued to thrive until 1958 when increased standards for health and safety caused the Tavascis to transition away from milk production to beef cattle.

Throughout the period, the families sought ways to control the marsh with the use of better drainage and the planting of Bermuda grass. Sharon Kim cites a 2009 interview with John Tavasci Sr., "If I could have killed the swamp, I would have, because it was taking up our land." About 100 acres was below water.

The elder Tavasci also talks about burning over the cattails periodically as a control method and seeding the marsh with bullfrogs to increase the revenue stream for his operation.

During the period that settlers attempted to tame the marsh, the Tuzigoot Ruin was restored and the museum established. The growing public attention to the area brought increasing interest in reviving the marsh. More and more people wanted to view the marsh and its bird and wildlife.

In the 1980s, owners Phelps Dodge began negotiating with the Arizona Game & Fish Department for management of the marsh. At the time, the mining company was considering developing the Verde Valley Ranch housing development. In 1990, the Tavasci monthly rent on the land was increased from \$75 to \$500, effectively forcing the family off the land.

Spurred by the Audubon Society, the Arizona Game & Fish Department with federal funds for wetland rehabilitation installed water control weirs, built an observation deck and small trail system in 1991.

The monument finally acquired the marsh in 2005.

In October 2008, an Arizona Water Protection Fund grant was awarded for \$375,000 with partner Natural Channel Design Inc.

A wildlife habitat workshop in 2010 invited other habitat folks and established goals for the project and to set percentiles for things like cattail, rushes, edge and the like. Experts were brought in from the Point Reyes National Seashore to look at the conditions of the marsh and delineate it.

One of the major steps under the preferred plan alternative is to reduce the population of cattails in the marsh from its current 70 percent to about 40 percent. The workshop also established other preferred percentiles for other marsh components.

Kim explains that, "Many of the cattails are made up of floating islands. Those are the cattails that would be reduced."

The ongoing management would be done by raising and lowering the water level in the marsh so that the cattails either flood or dry out. "They have a very narrow range of viability," she explains. That is a plan that requires the least amount of management.

While it was presumed that irrigation of Pecks Lake was required to assure the livelihood of the marsh, that apparently is not true. The dam and Brewer's tunnel have not functioned during the last year and a half, but the water levels remain moderate, apparently fed by the numerous springs.

A loop trail system with a foot bridge, boardwalk and viewing platform would be developed to ease the access to the marsh views. The marsh has been identified as an important birding area by the

Audubon society. A limited equestrian trail already exists in one small section along the edge of the marsh.

Kim explains that the Monument also wants to establish a biking trail through a portion of the footpath used as part of the Brian Mickelsen run that links to Dead Horse Ranch State Park.

That will require new rule making according to the natural resources chief.

Kim says, "Our worst fear is that this new rehabilitation system will end like the Arizona Game & Fish development did." Those structures are now overgrown with cattails and beaver dams.

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