



Yuma wetlands' state funding could dry up

[BY JOYCE LOBECK - SUN STAFF WRITER](#)

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A state agency that has provided crucial funding to the Yuma East Wetlands restoration project over the years is now fighting for its survival.

In 2011, the Arizona Legislature voted to permanently eliminate general fund appropriations for the Arizona Water Protection Fund grant program. That would have meant come July 1, AWPf would be unable to award new grant projects.

Just this week, the program did get a one-year reprieve to continue until July 1, 2013.

"That was a short-term solution," said Charles Flynn, executive director of the Yuma Crossing National Heritage Area, which has used grants through the program as leverage for even larger federal grants.

"But it's a very unstable situation," Flynn said. "The concerns are for the longer-term survival of the program."

Without AWPf funding, the Yuma East Wetlands would have never become a reality, he said.

"Yuma is understandably proud of our success in restoring more than 400 acres of wetlands in one of the most challenging environments for restoration," Flynn said. "However, this would have never happened without help from the Arizona Water Protection Fund."

Over a seven-year period, the AWPf awarded eight grants to the Heritage Area for a total of nearly \$2.5 million to restore the wetlands. As a result, more than 400 acres of a trash-strewn jungle of non-native vegetation have been transformed into a beautiful wetlands area full of native plants, trees, birds and animals, Flynn said.

As the tangle of invasive vegetation has been replaced with native plants and trees and water quality has improved, the bird population has doubled and bird diversity increased by 75 percent. In fact, the wetlands project has been recognized for its contributions to restoring endangered species.

Nature trails allow residents and visitors to explore and enjoy the area during daylight hours.

"Frankly, they believed in our project and demonstrated their confidence with grants year after year when other agencies were skeptical," Flynn said of AWPf. "They also provided the critical local match for federal grants we were receiving."

Tom Rushin, Heritage Area board chairman, added: "Citizens who enjoy and appreciate what the Yuma East Wetlands has done for Yuma's riverfront should express their support for funding the AWPf. These are difficult times for all local and state governments, but I hope we will take into consideration the positive impact the Arizona Water Protection Fund has had not just in Yuma, but throughout the state."

The Legislature established the AWPf in 1994 to provide money for grassroots projects that will maintain, enhance and restore rivers, streams and associated riparian resources through a yearly competitive public grant process, according to the fund's website. It is overseen by a citizen-based commission.

The commission has invested in 209 projects over the past 16 years and contributed almost \$43 million toward the restoration, protection and enhancement of river and riparian resources in Arizona.

Flynn encourages Yumans to contact elected officials and urge that funding be restored to the grant program.

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