

How to better engage farmers along the Lower Gila River

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Research Question:

What gaps in government conservation incentive programs prevent Lower Gila River farmers from fully engaging and how can they be filled to protect the Yuma Ridgway's Rail and the livelihoods of farmers?

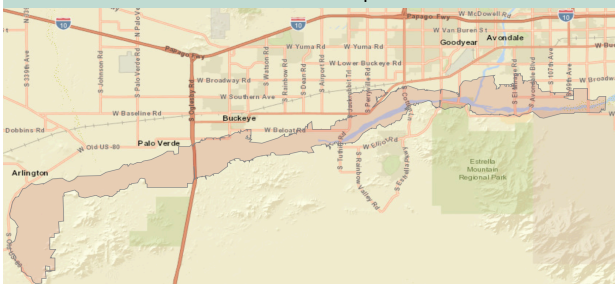


A Changing Status Quo:

- The **Lower Gila River** is a **designated Globally Important Bird Area**, partially because it is the home of the **endangered Yuma Ridgway's Rail**.
- People have been farming along the Lower Gila River since the Hohokam civilization inhabited the region.
- Audubon Arizona believes that **agriculture in this region is important to birds**, who use the fields as supplementary habitat. However, there are many challenges that face farming in the Lower Gila River region.
- Agricultural lands are being replaced by cities.**
- Many farmers are selling their land to developers** who own the land and lease it back to farmers, until they are ready to develop the land.
- Government incentive programs are available through the Farm Bill for farmers to implement more sustainable practices and install improved infrastructure.

Study Area:

The study area of this project is the designated Globally Important Bird Area along the Lower Gila River from the 91st Avenue Wastewater Treatment Plant to the Gillespie Dam.



Map: Elija Flores/Audubon Arizona

Methods:

I conducted background research to construct a current picture along the Lower Gila River. Then I interviewed farmers and conservation experts through a semi-structured interview format using voice memos, then transcribed interviews manually and through Temi transcription software. I then analyzed the data in Microsoft Excel to point out main concerns.



Three Trends:

- After talking to the five farmers and two agricultural experts, there are clear gaps between farmers and their ability to access the conservation incentive programs. The main gaps between farmers and these programs are you don't know what you don't know and without previous knowledge of these programs, **many of the farmers either are not aware that the programs exist or do not have the human capital to use them.**



"The bummer about it is you kinda gotta know what you're doing to get involved in it. There's not a lot of, 'this is how you do it.' Hold your hand and we'll get it done for you."

- Often times the farmers themselves do not have time to fill out the necessary paperwork to even be considered for a conservation program. **There are often too many hoops to jump through** that prevents them from seeing the benefits of the programs.

"They're all a pain in the butt for the landowner. I can tell you everyone is going to look at it with a jaundiced eye, because they're going to be skeptical if it involves the feds."



- Another main gap is a **lack of trust between conservationists, government agencies, and farmers.** In the past, stakeholders have not been engaged before actions that affected their livelihoods were taken, this bred animosity and a lack of willingness to work together to achieve a common goal. With recent actions at the state and local level **this mentality may be changing.**



"I think we've gone through different cycles of our politics to where, 'dammit I want to do it how I want to do it.' And we can't do that anymore, we have to work as a team."

Main Challenge:

The presence of agriculture near the Lower Gila River supports significant bird populations, therefore the maintenance of agriculture in this region is important. Incentives, through the USDA's Farm Bill or through other agencies, may help maintain agriculture and agricultural practices that support birds. **The problem lies mostly in the time and labor it takes to apply for the conservation incentive programs before the improvements can ever begin.**

A Possible Solution:

- The problems that farmers tend to face prevent them from engaging in conservation programs is at a bureaucratic level, a path forward might be to use a local conservation group such as Audubon Arizona or The Nature Conservancy or even individual irrigation districts as applicants and participants in a **Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP).**
- Using an RCPP, all of the conservation incentives programs could be managed under one umbrella, with streamlined paperwork and working closely with farmers and other landowners. **The projects would need to be "shovel ready,"** with enough farmers on board this could increase the likelihood of funding local conservation projects.
- Based on farmer interviews, momentum for local action is there, they just **need assistance through the process** to tap into the technology and practices.

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