

THE GILA AND SAN FRANCISCO RIVERS ARE NOT WILD AND FREE FLOWING

By Howard Hutchinson

Multiple articles contain repetitions of many misleading talking points from the proponents of the Gila wild and scenic river designations. These often repeated fictions are summed up in the following, “The Gila River itself, on the New Mexico side of the New Mexico-Arizona border, is completely free-flowing.” or “It’s the last completely free-flowing river in New Mexico. That’s why this is such a big deal.”

Reporters and the public should verify information distributed from any source rather than just blindly repeating slogans and press releases. That the Gila is the last free flowing river is just one of the myths promoted. While falsehoods after multiple repetitions may find common acceptance they never become the truth. The Gila and San Francisco rivers are beautiful and home to a high diversity of species, including humans, which access and use their waters.

The San Francisco River begins in Arizona as a series of small creeks. Its first stop is the Luna Lake dam just a mile before the New Mexico line. A few miles downstream the river is diverted into the 1892 Luna Irrigation Ditch. After numerous deliveries to fields and groundwater wells the river dives through a box canyon with another quick stop at a dam that generates electricity for a small community.

The river then waters livestock before it reaches the Village of Reserve where domestic and municipal wells draw water for families, schools, medical clinic and businesses. The middle and lower Frisco ditch companies then divert water to several parciantes. Between Reserve and Alma most of the river dries up between June and September excepting a few flows in response to monsoon rains.

Where the highway 180 bridge crosses over the river begins one of five more ditch diversions before joining the Gila river back in Arizona. There are also several hundred wells that tap the river water in the Glenwood area.

The Gila River isn’t free flowing either. At the Gila Cliff Dwellings on the West fork of the Gila River begin several irrigation diversions as well as a number of government, private and business wells. The dam on Sapillo Creek holds Lake Roberts. Sapillo is a significant tributary of the Gila. This dam and multiple diversions are above the Wilderness.

The East, West and Middle forks of the Gila gather together just above the wilderness. These upper tributaries provide water for grazing allotments. Where the river tumbles out of the wilderness it flows into the Cliff-Gila valley. There several diversion dams and municipal, domestic and commercial wells divert water to residential, industrial, agricultural and mining enterprises.

Proponents of the designations are responsible for the closing down of the logging industry, beneficial forest management, and access to our national forests. They are also behind the introduction of the Mexican wolf, efforts to close mines, elimination of hunting and trapping and opposition to the region’s access to the only new water available to New Mexico. Why would anyone believe the proponents intentions for the designations are benevolent given their past history?

Howard Hutchinson is Chairman of the San Francisco Soil and Water Conservation District, a member of the New Mexico CAP Entity and has been engaged in the effort to restore water rights to New Mexicans lost in the 1960’s lower Colorado River adjudications since 1973.