

Gila Box

Riparian National Conservation Area

Manager's Annual Report
FY 2014

BLM



NATIONAL
CONSERVATION
LANDS

Arizona



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1 Gila Box Profile

Designating Authority

Designating Authority: The Arizona Desert Wilderness Act of 1990 (Public Law 101-628)

Date of Designation: November 28th, 1990

Acreeage

Total Acres in Unit	BLM Acres	Other Fed. Acres	State Acres	Other Acres
21,767	21,767	0	0	1720

Contact Information

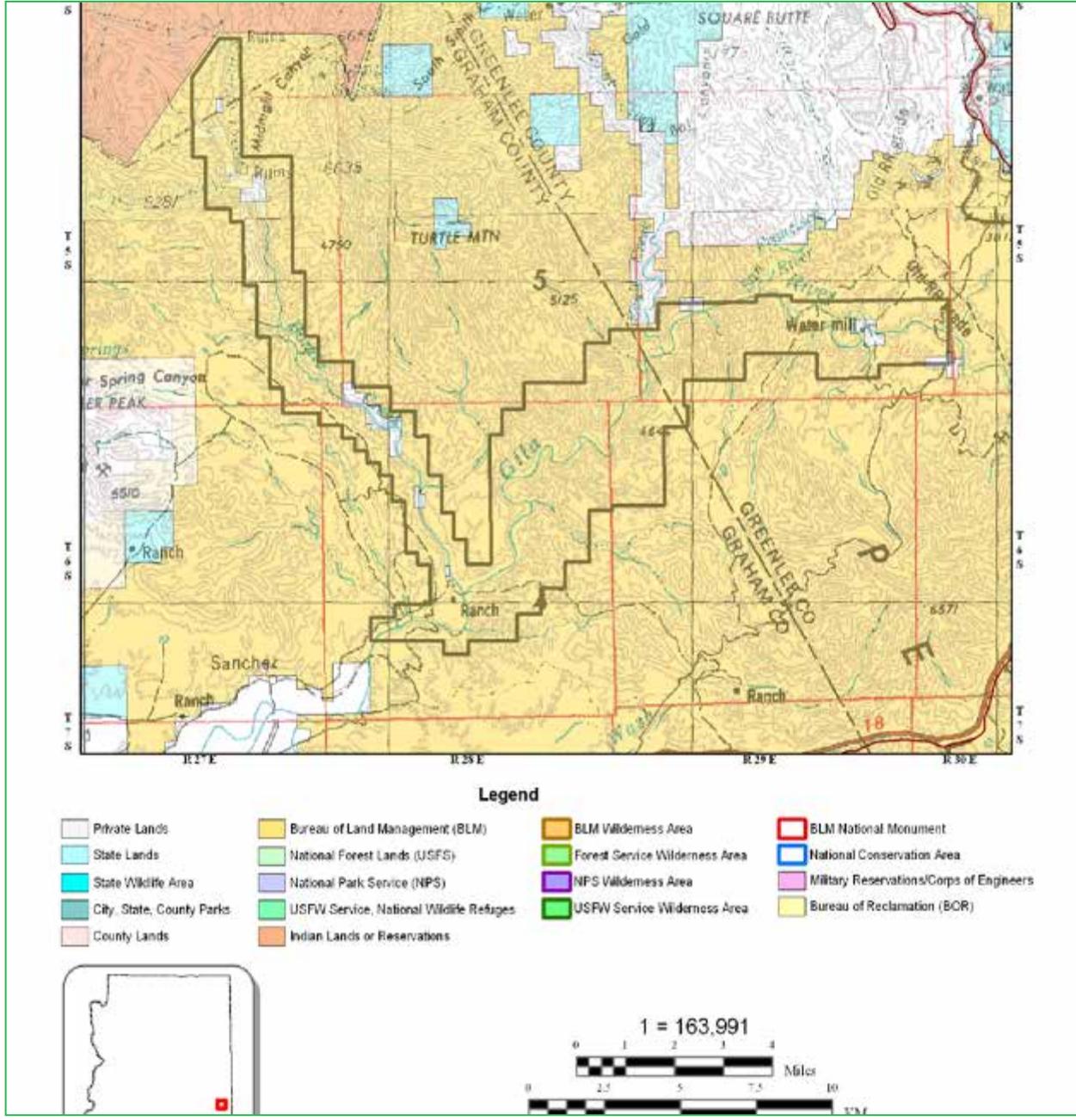
Unit Manager	Phone	E-mail	Mailing Address
Tom Schnell	928-348-4420	tschnell@blm.gov	711 S. 14 th Ave, Safford AZ, 85546

Field Office	District Office	State Office
Safford	Gila	Arizona

Budget

Total FY14 Budget	Subactivity 1711	Other Subactivities/ Contributions	Other Funding
\$771,292.00	\$766,796.00	\$4,496.00	

Map of Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area



Managing Partners

NA

Staffing

The Gila Box RNCA does not have its own staff. It shares staff with the Safford Field Office staff. There were a total of 15 employees who worked for the Gila Box RNCA for fiscal year 2014. Some of that staff includes: Wildlife Biologist-0486 (30%), Outdoor Recreation Planner-0023 (40%), River Ranger-0025 (80%), 2 Park Rangers-0025 (40%), Archeologist-0193 (20%), Rangeland Management Specialist-0454 (50%), Fisheries Biologist-0482 (70%), 3 Law Enforcement Officers-1801 (35%), Natural Resource Specialists-0401 (30%), GIS Specialist (35%), Realty Specialists-0301 (10%) and the RNCA manager.

2 Planning and NEPA

Status of RMP

We are currently using the Gila Box Management Plan, Environmental Assessment and Decision Record January, 1998. We are continuing the implementation and evaluation strategies. This plan will be revised when we begin the Safford RMP. There is no definite date when work will begin on the Safford RMP.

Status of Activity Plans

NA

Status of RMP Implementation Strategy

The Gila Box RNCA implementation strategy consists of multiple components. They include: Riparian Management, Recreation Management, Travel Plan management, Cultural Resource management, Fisheries/Wildlife and Threatened/Endangered Species Management, Water Quality management, and Range management.

During fiscal year 2014 Riparian management implementation goals were achieved through six week study of four miles of riparian area of the Gila River. The study focused on the Properly Functioning Condition (PFC) of the river and riparian area. Recreation management implementation goals were achieved through recreation site maintenance, continuing partnerships/cooperative agreements and monitoring of developed and undeveloped recreations areas. The Transportation System management implementation goals were accomplished through monitoring of route signs, monitoring and repair of route closures and off route vehicle tracks. Cultural Resource management implementation goals were achieved through monitoring of cultural sites. Fisheries/Wildlife management implementation goals

were achieved through monitoring for native and nonnative species on 1.5 miles of river in the Gila Box. Non aquatic wildlife was also monitored on 10 river patrols. Range management implementation goals were achieved through 10 river patrols which assisted with monitoring trespass cattle and repair and maintenance of range allotment fences.

Key NEPA Actions and/or Project Authorizations

DNA University of Arizona Outdoor Adventure Program: A SRP was issued to University of Arizona to conduct guided river trips on the Gila River within the Gila Box RNCA.

DNA Yellowhorn Outfitters: A SRP was issued to Yellowhorn Outfitters to conduct guided hunting trips within the Gila Box RNCA.

3 Year's Projects and Accomplishments

General Accomplishments

1. Continued development and fostering of the Living Rivers program. This is a partnership with Eastern Arizona College that provides employment and educational opportunities for youth. In fiscal year 2014, six weeks of Riparian/Proper Functioning Condition (PFC) research was completed by four Living Rivers interns.

2. The work to inventory and maintain the entire boundary fence around the Gila Box RNCA continued into fiscal year 2014. This is an extremely critical task in an effort to control unauthorized livestock grazing and OHV use throughout the Gila Box RNCA. This is a major undertaking given the number of miles of fence and extremely rugged terrain. We were able to utilize American Conservation Experience Youth Crews at the beginning of the fiscal year 2014 to further this task. The initial



1. ACE Crew building fence

work produced great results and we already have plans to continue to use these crews to complete this task.

3. The City of Safford improved four miles of roads within the Gila Box RNCA. These newly surfaced roads are the key access roads into the Gila Box RNCA and give public visitors easier access to recreation sites along the Gila River within the RNCA.
4. With assistance from volunteers, BLM Recreation employees maintained 11 developed recreation sites that include: two developed campgrounds, six picnic areas, two boat launch/take out areas and a wildlife viewing area. Visits to these sites and others within the Gila Box RNCA totaled over 35,000.
5. Park Rangers along with volunteers maintained over 10 miles of trail within and bordering the Gila Box RNCA.
6. The River Ranger with assistance from seven volunteers completed 10 river patrols throughout the year. These patrols are vital in monitoring and protecting the resources within the Gila Box RNCA.
7. Worked closely with the City of Safford to allow for their operation and maintenance of the City of Safford water supply system located in Bonita Creek within the RNCA. This was a major effort as we had to deal with issues associated with a growing beaver population that enhance the values of the RNCA but also impact the operation and maintenance of the water system.

Current Areas of Focus

Riparian Management: Fiscal year 2014 included a study of four miles of riparian area within

the Gila Box RNCA to assess the functionality of the riparian area. One of the principle obstacles to a fully functioning riparian system is the trespass of cattle. 10 river patrols were conducted to monitor for cattle trespass and range fence functionality. Patrols also consisted of repairing and building sections of allotment fence to keep cattle out of the riparian areas of the Gila Box RNCA. Youth crews removed eight acres of invasive tamarisk, which was spread out along 10 miles of Bonita Creek.

Threatened/Endangered Species: The Gila Box RNCA supports five federally endangered fish species and four BLM Sensitive fish species. Annual monitoring is conducted at five sites on the Gila River and seven sites on Bonita Creek to detect presence, absence, relative abundance, and distribution of both native and nonnative fish species. In addition, BLM personnel and volunteers mechanically remove nonnative fish species from Bonita Creek for native fish persistence and viability. Fish monitoring and nonnative fish removal will continue into FY 2015 to assist the Threatened, Endangered, and Sensitive fish species.

Recreation Management: Recreational use can be very high within the Gila Box. Use consists of camping, hiking, birding, river running, hunting and OHV riding. Management emphasis focused on maintaining facilities throughout the RNCA. Another area of focus within recreation is the use of OHVs within the riparian area. Historically OHV use within the riparian corridor was common and degraded the riparian quality. Since the designation of the RNCA, off road travel has dropped drastically. However, off road travel still remains an issue and was a primary emphasis of law enforcement patrols in FY14.

Education, Outreach, and Interpretation

Our partnership with the Graham County Chamber of Commerce enabled us to do an incredible amount of outreach and education. Through interpretive displays located in the Chamber of Commerce and a knowledgeable Chamber staff providing information to the public, we were able to reach a much wider audience.

A new Gila Box RNCA visitor brochure was completed and printed this FY. The brochure includes information about all the values of the area as well as an updated map of the RNCA highlighting location of facilities and roads in the area. These brochures are available at BLM offices as well as at one of our partners, the Graham County Chamber of Commerce.

Two Park Rangers, an Archeologist and a GIS specialist participated in Morenci High job shadow day. It consisted of allowing four students from Morenci High School to job shadow the Rangers and the Archeologist. They took the students to the Gila Box and let them see some of the areas which are managed by the BLM. Students were able to learn firsthand, how the BLM manages public land and what it looks like to work for the BLM in different job positions.

The office participated in many community events throughout FY 14 where presentations were made about the Gila Box RNCA including the Graham County Fair, Gila Valley Science and Safety

Fair, numerous elementary and high school classes, civic organization, hiking clubs, and OHV groups.

Partnerships

1. **Safford Chamber of Commerce:** The Chamber of Commerce partnership is to assist in outreach and education for the Gila Box RNCA through the Chamber of Commerce Visitor Center. They supply educational materials and information to visitors.
2. **Eastern Arizona College (EAC):** Provides students for the Living Rivers program to assist with research and field work in the Gila Box RNCA. They also assist with the management of the Discovery Park Greenhouse which grows and supplies the Gila Box RNCA with native vegetation for restoration projects when needed.
3. **City of Safford:** The city of Safford uses Bonita Creek as a source for drinking water for the Gila Valley residents. The partnership focuses on continuing to provide drinking water while allowing protection and enhancement of the Gila Box natural and cultural resources. The current memorandum of understanding will expire in 2016 and work began this FY too renew this mutually beneficial partnership.
4. **Gila Watershed Partnership of Arizona:** The Gila Watershed Partnership works on protection and restoration of the entire Gila River watershed. They provide assistance to the BLM with grants, technical advice, field work and co-management of the Discovery Park Greenhouse.
5. **University of Arizona:** The University of Arizona Fisheries program provided students to participate with the fisheries program within the Gila Box. Students assisted the BLM with nonnative fish removal and native fish monitoring.

Volunteers

Seven volunteers assisted with six river patrols, which focused on monitoring cattle trespass, fence repair and public contacts. They had a total of 427 hours of volunteer hours.

Five volunteers assisted Park Rangers throughout the year on a variety of projects (campground clean up, sign repair, recreation monitoring). They had a total of 30 volunteer hours.

The Gila Box RNCA had four campground hosts volunteer in Fiscal year 14. The hosts donated 2,632 hours of service towards projects such as: campground maintenance, patrols, trail work, public contacts/education and sign repair/inventory.

Volunteer hours for the Gila Box RNCA totaled **3,089** for Fiscal year 2014.

Land (or Interests in Land) Acquisitions

N/A

4 Science

Science

Riparian

In the summer of 2014 for six weeks, the Safford BLM with the Living Rivers team conducted intensive inventory across four miles of the Gila Box RNCA. Data was collected for water quality and plant community characterization for mesquite bosques and cottonwood galleries, wildlife habitat and monitoring of species populations (T&E). This data was used to assist the BLM with the assessment of the proper functioning condition (PFC). The project was completed in the late summer of 2014.

Fisheries

The Safford BLM Fisheries, Wildlife, and Recreation programs cooperatively completed the annual Gila River and Bonita Creek fish monitoring at five and seven sites, respectively. At all Gila River sites, nonnative fish species were the primary catch with native fishes being rare or absent; whereas in Bonita Creek native fishes dominated at all sites with the exception of one site located below the Bonita Creek fish barrier. Habitat characterization, pebble counts, and water quality data were collected at all monitoring sites to provide additional information on fish distribution and assemblages.

The Safford BLM fisheries program relies heavily on interns, volunteers, and partnership collaborations to accomplish conservation and management achievements. In 2014, the BLM, Safford Field Office hired two interns through the Chicago Botanic Garden Conservation and Land Management (CLM) internship program and also partnered with the University of Arizona's fisheries program to remove nonnative fishes from Bonita Creek to improve conditions for native fish. In 2014, nonnative fish were mechanically removed from Bonita Creek and comprised of 3,005 green sunfish, 794 yellow bullhead, 4,315 fathead minnow, and 6,127 Western mosquitofish, and two Virile crayfish. Volunteer assistance from University of Arizona students and other partners greatly benefitted the project. Removal efforts are showing promising results with native fish species increasing, including the federally endangered Gila chub.

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Resources, Objects, Values, and Stressors

“In order to conserve, protect, and enhance its **riparian** areas and associated resources, and the **aquatic, wildlife, archeological, paleontological, scientific, cultural, recreational, educational, scenic** and other resources....”

Riparian

Riparian quality data comes partially from the Properly Functioning Condition assessment (PFC) for FY 2014. It consists of vegetation type, amount, hydrology, erosion and deposition. Gila Box RNCA was designated to protect this unique resource (riparian area) in the desert southwest. Historically the Gila Box was overgrazed from cattle and damaged from OHV traffic. Since designation, grazing and off route travel has been eliminated from the riparian areas within the NCA. The Gila Box riparian has greatly improved in the 15 years since beginning implementation of the management plan.

Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	Improving

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Miles in Unit	Miles Inventoried	Miles Possessing Object	Miles Monitored in FY14
40	40	40	4

Stressors Affecting Riparian

Climate change, drought, introduction and spread of invasive species, unauthorized off highway vehicle use, trespass cattle grazing, and sediment loading from upland erosion.

Aquatics/Fisheries

The Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area (RNCA) contains a 15-mile segment of Bonita Creek, 23 miles of the Gila River, one mile each of Eagle Creek and the San Francisco River, creating a total of 40 linear stream miles and one of the most significant riparian zones in the southwest. The Gila River within the Gila Box is designated critical habitat for the federally endangered Razorback sucker (*Xyrauchen texanus*) and Bonita Creek is designated critical habitat for the federally endangered loach minnow (*Tiaroga cobitis*) and spikedace (*Meda fulgida*). Historically, the upper Gila River supported 16 native fishes. Today, the Gila River within the Gila Box supports three native fish species and Bonita Creek supports six.

Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Within the Gila Box, native fishes are doing poorly in the main stem Gila River due to the presence of nonnative fishes. In tributary habitats, native fishes are faring better due to cooperative conservation efforts to remove nonnative fish species.	The trend for aquatics/fisheries within Bonita Creek is stable at this time due to on-going conservation efforts.

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Miles in Unit	Miles Inventoried	Miles Possessing Object	Miles Monitored in FY14
40	40	40	1.5

Stressors Affecting Aquatics/Fisheries

Native fishes throughout the Gila Box are declining due to the establishment and spread of nonnative aquatic species, primarily nonnative fishes. Predation by nonnatives on young or small fishes is the most prominent mechanism of native declines.

Other stressors include trespass livestock and vehicle use that can impact riparian vegetation and add sedimentation to the river. The extended drought has also put stress on the native fish population.

Key Threats: Water withdrawals, climate change, drought, introduction and spread of invasive species, unauthorized off highway vehicle use, and trespass cattle grazing.

Wildlife

Wildlife (non-fisheries) consists of over 200 bird species, desert and Rocky Mountain big horn sheep, mule and white-tail deer, coatimundi, lowland leopard frog, mountain lion and many other species.

Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	Varies by species

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY14
21,767	21,767	21,767	22 river miles (10 river patrols)

Stressors Affecting Wildlife

Climate change and drought reduce water sources in the adjoining uplands which results in increased use of the riparian area. Unauthorized livestock and off highway vehicle use has a disproportionate disturbance effect in these areas due to the canyon walls and limited access points. Non-native American bullfrogs and fish and the introduced chytrid fungus, *Batrachochytrium dendrobatidis*, have almost eliminated lowland leopard frogs from the RNCA.

Key Threats: Water withdrawals, climate change, drought, introduction and spread of invasive species, unauthorized off highway vehicle use, and unauthorized cattle grazing.



Coatimundi found within the Gila Box

Archeology/Cultural

The fact that the RNCA includes the Gila River, Bonita Creek and the San Francisco River ensures the likely number of historic and archaeological sites for the entire RNCA is close to 1000 with between 150 -200 sites being of exceptional value in terms of Cultural Resources. The RNCA houses a number of unique Prehistoric resources, such as Pueblo DeVol, one of the earliest Anasazi sites in South Eastern Arizona; the Bonita Creek Ceremonial Cave where many perishable artifacts were recovered; Eagle Creek rock Art site which has piqued the interest of Dr. Polly Schaafsma an expert on early Native American rock art. Important Historic sites include the U-Diamond CCC Camp and associated projects. Additionally there is an Arizona Prison Work Camp associated with the opening of U.S. Highway 666 in 1917-18 as well as ranches, mining claims, and general Americana History.

Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	stable

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY14
21,767	~1625 acres or ~7.5% inventoried to Class III Cultural Resources Survey level	75 sites have been recorded in the Gila Box RNCA totaling 219 acres.	125 acres

Stressors Affecting Archeology/Cultural

Cultural Resources throughout the Gila Box are suffering from the effects of age, erosion and visitation. Another major problem in the Safford Area as well as most of the Southwest is looting sites for archaeological artifacts. Also trespass off-road vehicle use continues to impact some cultural resources.



Pueblo Devol archeological site

Recreation

The Gila Box RNCA provides a wide variety of recreational opportunities. Activities include birding, river floating, camping, hiking, fishing and hunting. The Gila Box also has multiple operating outfitter/guide SRP holders who provide these recreational activities to the public as well.

Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	upward

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY14
21,767	21,767	21,767	NA

Stressors Affecting Recreation

Increased visitation and use create more demand for recreational sites and opportunities. With increase in recreational users and types of recreation, conflicts among recreational use will continue to affect recreation management. Continued Climate Change and drought will continue to affect flows of the Gila River, which is a recreational attraction for the Gila Box.

Scenic/Visual Values

The Gila Box RNCA is designated as Visual Resource Management Class II to maintain current scenic values.

Status and Trend Table

Status of Resource, Object, or Value	Trend
Good	stable

Inventory, Assessment, Monitoring Table

Acres in Unit	Acres Inventoried	Acres Possessing Object	Acres Monitored in FY14
21,767	21,767	21,767	21,767

Stressors Affecting Visual Resources

Land use authorizations which may include: roads, transmission lines and buildings.

6 Summary of Performance Measure

The resources of the Gila Box RNCA are in a fair to good status at the current time but have greatly improved since the beginning of designation status (1990). All of resources have stable to improving trends. Native Fish species appear to face the most serious threats. While native fish are declining in the Gila River due to a number of factors, many out of our control. However, the condition and numbers of native fish are improving in Bonita Creek due to management practices taken by BLM and our partners.

Summary Table*		
Resource, Object, or Value	Status	Trend
Riparian	Fair to Good	Improving
Aquatic	Fair to Good	Stable
Wildlife	Good	Stable
Archeology/Cultural	Good	Stable
Recreation	Good	Improving
Scenic/Visuals	Good	Stable

*This table is a synthesis of the individual object/value status tables in the "Objects, Values, and Stressors" section.

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Manager's Letter

Fiscal year 2014 saw the continuation of many key accomplishments and continued hard work in managing the Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area. These accomplishments would not have been possible without an incredibly dedicated BLM staff and strong support from our external partners. It is very exciting to see these partnerships continue to develop and grow each year. These partnerships have allowed the local community to be actively engaged in the management of the RNCA and they become more essential each year in assisting us to complete our mission. Every year it is very rewarding to engage our youth in managing these special places and this year was no different. Our Living Rivers Program continues to allow interns to assist us in accomplishing our important work. Also in FY 14 we continued to utilize American Conservation Experience youth crews in inventorying and maintaining our boundary fencing around the NCA. We have used these youth crew for several years and are starting to see the results of this massive effort with reduced cattle and OHV trespass in the RNCA.

Looking ahead to next year we will focus on continuing to develop and foster these partnerships. In addition in fiscal year 2015 one of our primary efforts will be to renew our memorandum of understanding with the City of Safford to assure that this vital partnership continues into the future. Part of the renewal process will include consultation with the Fish and Wildlife Service to assure protection of Threatened and Endangered species within the RNCA. We are confident that we will strengthen this partnership that allows the City of Safford to provide water to its customers while protecting the values of the RNCA.

Tom Schnell
Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area Manager



NATIONAL CONSERVATION LANDS

Gila Box Riparian National Conservation Area

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