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'Wild and Scenic River'

Renzi, McCain to introduce Fossil Creek bill

By JOANNA DODDER The Daily Courier

U.S. Sen. John McCain and U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi plan to introduce legislation next week to include Fossil Creek in the nation's Wild and Scenic River System.

The unique waters form in the Fossil Creek Wilderness Area along the Yavapai County border near Strawberry. The creek runs 14 miles through the national forest to the Verde River southeast of Camp Verde. A stretch of the Verde River currently has the only Wild and Scenic River designation in Arizona.

"Fossil Creek is one of the most valuable natural treasures in Arizona, and I'm prepared to take the necessary steps to ensure it's preserved for generations to come," Renzi said Friday when he confirmed plans to introduce legislation next week.

"Fossil Creek is an extraordinary natural resource comparable to the more famous Havasu Creek in the Grand Canyon, with deep blue pools, waterfalls and striking rock formations," McCain said this past year when praising the decommissioning of a 97-year-old Arizona Public Service hydroelectric plant on the creek that once provided Prescott and its surrounding mines with power.

The Arizona Wilderness Coalition and Prescott College conducted a study to document the creek's values that make it eligible as a Wild and Scenic River because of its native fish, wildlife, scenery, geology and cultural resources.

"By all accounts, Fossil Creek is a glorious slice of planet," said Mary Lin of Prescott College.

The creek includes the largest set of natural springs in Arizona, with high concentrations of calcium carbonate that create the travertine formations similar to those at Havasu Falls and in caves.

The decommissioning of the power plant and its creek diversion dam last year led to this unique opportunity to protect the creek from dams forever, said Jason Williams from his Arizona Wilderness Coalition office in Prescott.

The creek now offers a unique opportunity to ensure the survival of five rare native fish species, he said.

"Wild and Scenic River status is the strongest protection we can bestow on a river, and we look forward to watching native plants and wildlife return and thrive in this place of incredible natural beauty in central Arizona," Williams said.

The U.S. Forest Service says the creek is eligible for the designation. The upper and lower thirds would be wild, while the middle third of the creek would be only scenic because Forest Road 708 runs through it.

The designation would require the Forest Service to protect the creek's water quality and quantity.

Numerous groups are supporting the Wild and Scenic designation, including conservation groups, the Town of Camp Verde, the City of Cottonwood and the Yavapai-Apache Tribe.

"We seek forgiveness from the water, that it now can be free and living again," said Vincent Randall, Yavapai-Apache tribal council member and Apache historian, in the tribe's letter of support for the designation. "This living water is a gauge of the health of the canyon and it is sacred to us." The Apache call the creek Tu Do Tliz.

Dan Campbell of The Nature Conservancy's office in Prescott praised Renzi for a series of recent efforts to preserve special natural places, including his work to convince the largest irrigation water user along the Upper San Pedro River to retire those water rights.

Renzi also helped form the National Landscape Conservation System Caucus in Congress to support extra money for special places on U.S. Bureau of Land Management properties, such as the Agua Fria National Monument in Yavapai County, Williams noted.

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