



Press Release



HUACHUCA
AUDUBON
SOCIETY

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Tuscany in the Desert?

Tucson Audubon and Huachuca Audubon Call on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to Evaluate Impacts of the “Villages at Vigneto” Development

TUCSON, AZ – The Tucson Audubon Society and the Huachuca Audubon Society are calling for an updated assessment of impacts from the proposed Villages at Vigneto (Vigneto), a city-sized development that threatens to adversely impact the San Pedro River, a Global Important Bird Area, migration corridor and biodiversity hot spot. Tucson Audubon has sent [a formal request](#) to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) to re-evaluate the Clean Water Act (CWA) Section 404 permit the Corps originally issued to Whetstone Ranch in 2006, nearly a decade ago. The original development proposal has since been significantly expanded and given a new name (Vigneto) and Tuscan-theme by its new owners, El Dorado Holdings, Inc., operating locally as El Dorado Benson, LLC (El Dorado).

Vigneto’s Tuscany-inspired development is proposed for over 12,000 acres of private land located southwest of Benson, Arizona - current population 5,100. Vigneto proposes 27,760 new homes, commercial developments, golf courses, parks, vineyards, lakes, orchards, resorts, and an extensive road and utility network. Vigneto could attract up to 70,000 new residents. This will dramatically impact the environment surrounding Benson, and has the potential to significantly and irreversibly alter the already strained San Pedro River system, including the Nation’s first Riparian National Conservation Area. The Benson City Council is poised to vote on the final development plan in the near future, which will pave the way for construction to begin.

As early as 2004, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) officially objected to the Corps’ issuance of the 404 permit, “. . . because the authorization may result in substantial and unacceptable impacts to aquatic resources of national importance.” Correspondence between Corps and the EPA on the original 404 permitting process reveals that objections, concerns and recommendations clearly articulated by the EPA were not heeded by the Corps when it issued the permit in 2006. Now, with a new and much bigger development under consideration, we urge the Corps to re-evaluate the outdated permit, and consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to assess impacts to threatened and endangered species and migratory birds.

Karen Fogas, Tucson Audubon’s new Executive Director and recent transplant from South Dakota, was surprised to learn that such a massive, water intensive development had not been adequately evaluated, especially in the face of the serious drought conditions in the western U.S. and the 16 year-old state-wide drought emergency in Arizona. “The Villages at Vigneto is projected to use more than 10 times the amount of water that all of Benson currently uses” said Fogas. “Vigneto would be a new, super-sized straw in the hydrologic system, located adjacent to a globally significant bird migration corridor. We are concerned that extensive development and groundwater pumping will rob vital water from the precarious green ribbon of life that is the San Pedro River, while potentially polluting its tributaries. Vigneto will have serious, long-term implications for the river’s ecosystem functions and the community and region’s sustainability.”

“The Villages at Vigneto is a wake-up call for those of us who are concerned about the future of the San Pedro River and its sensitive ecology”, said Bob Hernbrode, biologist, former Arizona Game and Fish Commissioner and current Tucson Audubon Board Vice President. “The cart is way out ahead of the horse on this development. The Army Corps and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service need to rectify this by properly evaluating impacts of this new city in the desert upon jurisdictional waters and sensitive species.” Hernbrode, who has worked extensively in Arizona on watchable wildlife, recreation and development issues, is deeply concerned with the impacts to wildlife and wildlife-based recreation. “If the development dries up the river, it would undermine the sustainable world-renowned birding and nature-based economy that makes the San Pedro River Valley unique and irreplaceable.”

“We need to press the pause button on this fast-moving development so that its impacts can be properly evaluated before it is too late”, said Tricia Gerrodette, a concerned local land owner and President of the Huachuca Audubon Society. “The Villages at Vigneto is 50% larger than the original Whetstone Ranch proposal, which makes it a new and different development. Federal permitting agencies need to evaluate this with fresh eyes for its impacts to jurisdictional waters, listed species, and migratory birds. Creating a water-intensive Tuscany in the drought-stricken desert raises a red flag for the future of the nearby San Pedro River and downstream water users and mitigation lands. We urgently need Part 3 of the USGS hydrologic study before Vigneto moves forward, so that the best available science and modeling can inform our decision making.”

On average, Tuscany, Italy receives 36 inches of rain per year, while Benson receives less than 13 inches. There is mounting concern that attempting to re-create Tuscany in the desert may be too water intensive, unsustainable and irresponsible. We have concerns for potential impacts to desert grasslands, washes and wildlife corridors where the development's footprint would be located. Our bigger, looming concern relates to the potential adverse impacts to the San Pedro River and downstream water users, including the City of Benson itself.

For more information on this important issue, download our [Executive Summary](#) and [Conservation Action Alert](#).

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The Tucson Audubon Society is a nonprofit conservation organization with approximately 4,000 members that promotes the protection and stewardship of southeast Arizona's biological diversity through the study and enjoyment of birds and the places they live. Tucson Audubon's Conservation Program engages with our membership, the government sector and partner conservation organizations to influence the outcomes of legislation, policy decisions, projects and development proposals that effect habitats of high conservation value in southeast Arizona.

The Huachuca Audubon Society works to conserve and restore ecosystems so that birds and other wildlife can flourish and enrich the Earth's diversity. Huachuca Audubon Society members are concerned conservationists who work to extend the public awareness of the value of conservation. They also seek to inform and influence lawmakers so that their work may reflect this value.