



Tucson Audubon inspires people to enjoy and protect birds through recreation, education, conservation, and restoration of the environment upon which we all depend.

December 7, 2018

Mr. Fletcher McCuskor, Chair,
Rio Nuevo Board of Directors
Rio Nuevo Multipurpose District
400 W. Congress Street, Ste #152
Tucson, Arizona 85701

Dear Mr. McCuskor and Rio Nuevo Board members,

Established in 1949, the Tucson Audubon Society is a 501(c)(3) non-profit conservation organization with a mission of *inspiring people to protect and enjoy birds*. Our organization interacts with tens of thousands of people each year through guided bird walks and field trips, volunteer projects, citizen-science based conservation, and public outreach activities. We maintain a deep involvement with a wide variety of open space planning efforts and river management issues in Tucson.

I'm writing to you today on behalf of 2,500 Tucson Audubon members, in support of restoring the 27-acre "A" Mountain Landfill (AMLF) as an urban open space with native vegetation. Tucson Audubon also supports the placement of dredged Santa Cruz River soil material at the AMLF site to begin this restoration process. We're confident that the proposed Sonoran Desert Heritage Park, as envisioned in the voter-approved 1999 Proposition 400, has excellent potential for bird habitat, wildlife connectivity, and ecotourism.

The AMLF site, nearby Santa Cruz River, and Mission Gardens currently serve as a wildlife linkage between the river and the Tucson Mountains. The small, isolated Tucson Mountains range west of Tucson is the year-round home of vulnerable bird species like Gilded Flicker and Elf Owl. Migratory Rufous Hummingbirds and Wilson's Warblers occur in the vicinity of the AMLF on a seasonal basis. Western Screech Owl, Purple Martin, and Lucy's Warbler—and many other migrating species—rely on the Tucson Mountains as breeding habitat. As a result, the range includes a 73.2-square-mile area designated as an Important Bird Area (IBA) of global significance.

Bird and wildlife watching opportunities lure tens of thousands of eco-tourists to southeast Arizona every year. From a study conducted in 2013, these activities generate over \$1.4 billion in economic activity annually in Arizona. Recent reporting from the US Fish and Wildlife Service indicate that the economic impact of bird and wildlife watching is increasing. Tucson itself is a significant destination for birders. Tucson Audubon hosts the annual Southeast Arizona Birding Festival, which had a total participation of over 3,000 individuals over five days (August 8-12,

2018). The greater Tucson area is home to several well-known birding "hotspots," including sections of the Santa Cruz River where rare riparian habitat affords one the opportunity to see dozens of species in a single outing. Sweetwater Wetlands (Tucson) and the El Rio Preserve (Marana) are among these local hotspots. The Sonoran Desert Heritage Park could offer yet another opportunity to connect birds and people, while boosting the local economy.

Tucson Audubon, in collaboration with the Pima County Flood Control District and the Santa Cruz Origins Alliance, believes the placement of dredged soil material and establishment of native vegetation at the AMLF site provide an important first step towards establishing the Sonoran Desert Heritage Park. A favorable decision by the Rio Nuevo District will recognize the ecological importance of the AMLF and the value of connecting the Tucson Mountains with the Santa Cruz River. Tucson Audubon encourages the Board to take advantage of this opportunity and stands ready as an organizational partner for the project.

Jonathan E. Lutz



Executive Director, Tucson Audubon Society

CC Mayor Jonathan Rothschild
Tucson City Council
Pima County Board of Supervisors
Chuck Huckelberry, Pima County Administrator
Suzanne Shields, P.E., Director, Pima County Regional Flood Control District
Santa Cruz Origins Alliance