



Restoring Hope

Sonoran Institute celebrates 35 years of
community-based conservation

2025 ANNUAL REPORT

Message from the CEO and Board Chair

Restoring Hope



Mike Zellner | Chief Executive Officer

At the Sonoran Institute, our mission is rooted in connection—to land, water, community, and above all, to hope. In 2025, we proudly lived that mission by restoring ecosystems, relationships, and belief in what’s possible when people come together to care for the places they call home.

Restoring Hope isn’t just this year’s theme—it’s the heart of our work. Over the past 12 months, we’ve seen renewal across communities in Colorado, Arizona, California, and the U.S.–Mexico border through our Growing Water Smart program. In the Colorado River Delta and along Tucson’s Santa Cruz River, collaborative restoration efforts are transforming riverscapes and lives.

Communities played a powerful role. Volunteers rallied for Santa Cruz River cleanups in Arizona, while residents led the transformation of canals and green spaces through Mexicali Fluye. These grassroots efforts restored both land and civic pride.

We also brought people together through events like Growing Water Smart workshops, Santa Cruz River Research Days, and Women and Water. These gatherings fostered new partnerships and equipped local leaders with tools to shape more resilient, water-wise communities.

Our teams and partners worked tirelessly to restore key landscapes—from flourishing native habitat at Laguna Grande in the Delta, to reconnected flows reaching the sea, to renewed life along Tucson’s riverbanks. And through the Urban National Wildlife Refuge initiative, more people are experiencing the power of nearby nature.

As we celebrate our 35th year, we thank you for being part of this journey. We are now plotting our course for the next five years with our new strategic plan. Together, we look forward to restoring rivers, communities—and hope.



Dan Kimball | Chair, Board of Directors

Restoring Hope isn’t just this year’s theme—it’s the heart of our work. Across communities in Colorado, Arizona, California, Sonora, and Baja California, our workshops and collaborative restoration efforts are transforming riverscapes and lives.

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*After the March 2025 Board meeting, Ken Abrahams (Tucson), Skylar Begay (Tucson), Linda Friar (Annadale), César Ponce Gámez (Mexicali), Shaina Shay (Tucson) and Kristine Zeigler (Paso Robles) joined the Board of Directors. After the June 2025 meeting, Lee Leachman (Cheyenne), Richard Schaefer (Tucson) and David Wegner (Tucson/ Durango) transitioned to the Advisory Council.

Colorado River Delta

Sustaining Hope through Community

Our Colorado River Delta program has been restoring life and hope to the Delta for more than 20 years. Along with our partners, we dreamed of a Delta where the Colorado River flows again, where plants, animals, and communities thrive, and where the river once again connects to the sea.

Since then, we have turned a desiccated landscape into an 880-acre cottonwood-willow forest. Through the 2017 binational agreement Minute 323, we helped bring consistent water flows into the river channel to restore river habitat. And for 220 days over the last nine years, the Colorado reached the sea.

The secret to our success? “We are not afraid to try,” says Director of Programs Francisco Zamora. “We are committed, we don’t leave, and together with partners and communities, we bring hope for a better world.”

Our Mexicali Fluye project applies these values to the intractable problem of Mexicali’s polluted agricultural drainage canals and the New River they flow into. Mexicali’s drains have long been dumping grounds, and by the time the New River flows into California, it is contaminated with industrial, agricultural, and municipal waste. Surrounding communities have had little reason to hope that their quality of life would ever improve.

But seeing is believing.

“For 40 years, I have lived next to a polluted dump, and now I live next to a natural treasure.” Remarks like this have become common in the community, says Colorado River Delta Program Director Enrique Villegas. Mexicali Fluye is improving the water quality in a three-mile stretch of drains in the city while also

For 40 years, I have lived next to a polluted dump, and now I live next to a natural treasure.

ANONYMOUS MEXICALI COMMUNITY MEMBER



Mexicali Fluye is improving the water quality in a three-mile stretch of drains in the city while also creating green space and recreation areas for community well-being.

creating green space and recreation areas for community well-being. Now in full swing, the project is transforming the landscape—and the community’s perception of the area.

“Community engagement has always been a key element of this project,” Enrique says. “But now that they see improvements, local people are asking to help us clean the area, plant trees, and build parks. They are excited to create something beautiful for their community to enjoy and protect.”

Even better, our work has inspired hope for a lasting solution to the drain problem citywide. Government agencies, academia, and others in Mexicali have joined us to develop the city’s first master plan for managing its entire 100 miles of drains.



Growing Water Smart

Connection Fosters Confidence and Hope

“Convening is Sonoran Institute’s superpower,” says Growing Water Smart (GWS) Director Meryl Corbin. A partnership with the Babbitt Center for Land and Water Policy, a center for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, the program has been bringing community representatives together to address their water resource challenges through collaborative planning efforts since its first Colorado workshop in 2017. Almost 70% of Colorado residents now live in a GWS-trained community. After six workshops in Arizona, two in California, and three in “sister cities” along the U.S.–Mexico border, the momentum of GWS is palpable.

So is the sense of hope it provides. “Our workshops are empowering,” Meryl says. “Given time together and a little guidance, participants realize they have the skills to plan for a better future, manage the water they need to develop, and still maintain their community values.”

In Colorado, we see a direct throughline from our workshops to key legislative agendas, in particular new legislation requiring communities to consider water resources in comprehensive planning. After highlighting the environmental and community challenges of Colorado’s water transfer projects, our “Bridging the Gap” study continues to convene communities on both sides of this issue for constructive conversations.

The flexibility of the GWS model allows us to adapt to pressing issues throughout our program areas. For example, at the Arizona Verde Valley workshop, we built on ongoing

regional collaboratives by including a work session where the six communities could discuss shared opportunities. The session sparked further cooperation, enabling the communities to advance regional policies for water resource management.

As California communities respond to growing climate and regulatory pressures, they are seeking tools to track the integration of land use and water management. To meet this need, we are expanding our Colorado Metrics Program to California, supporting data-driven planning and coordinated local action.

Our first single-day workshop at the border yielded eye-opening discussions about the difficulties Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Douglas, Arizona, face with managing local water supplies. The two cities are now able to explore cross-border solutions for the use of effluent and aquifer management.

Post-workshops, our Peer Network connects GWS alumni with ongoing education, resources, and each other. “Overall, communities walk away with a lot of hope that they can do this work,” Meryl says. “And they know we will remain a trusted partner, here to support them for the long haul.”

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MERYL CORBIN | Growing Water Smart Director

Growing Water Smart brought together leaders from Agua Prieta, Sonora, and Douglas, Arizona, to tackle shared water management challenges.





Budding citizen scientist explores Laguna Grande for *Sabados Familiares*.

Restoring Hope

The Colorado River Basin faces unprecedented challenges—dwindling flows, rising demands, and deep uncertainty for the communities, economies, and ecosystems that depend on it. Yet amid this crisis, the Sonoran Institute is advancing with resilience, collaboration, and impact.

In 2025, we celebrate 35 years of action with partners and supporters in Tucson, Denver, and Mexicali. Growing Water Smart has reached more than 100 communities, representing 9.6 million people, and the Santa Cruz River program extended the flowing portion of the river to 40 miles. These milestones highlight the power of long-term commitment to collaboration and community-led conservation.

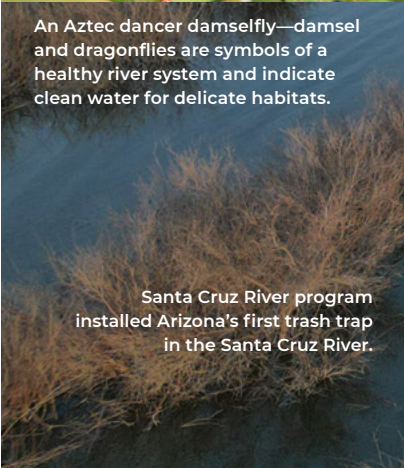
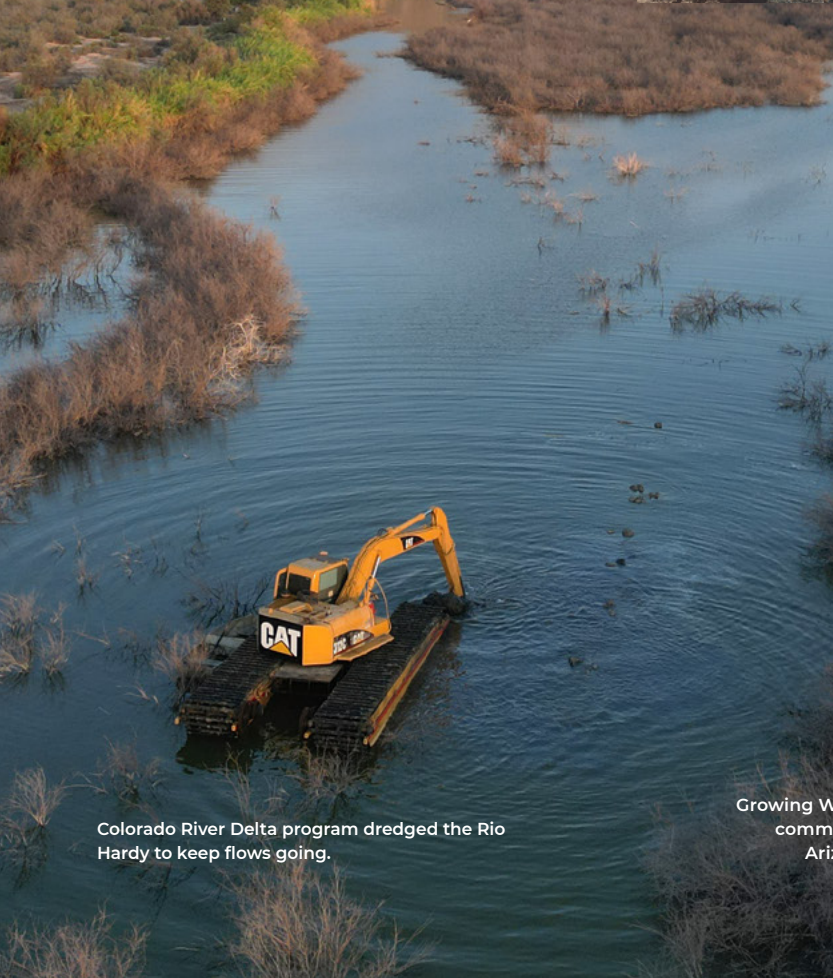
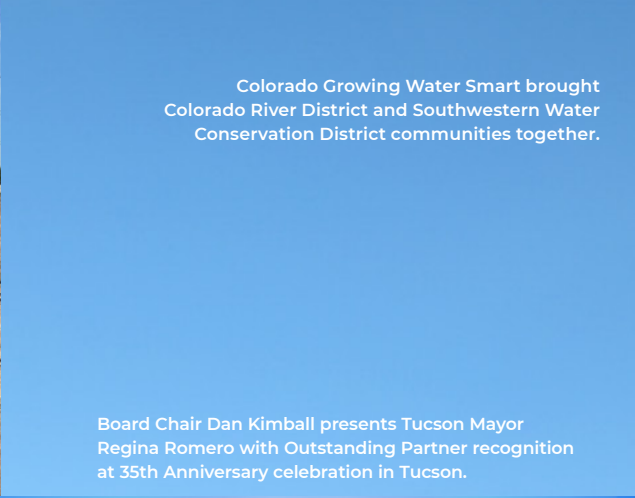
In the Colorado River Delta, strategic water releases have brought life back to once-dry channels, with water now flowing more than 200 days in a single year. Wetlands are reviving, wildlife is returning, and communities are inspired by the sight of a living river.

In Mexicali, Mexicali Fluye mobilizes thousands of residents to clean and reclaim drains, transforming neglected spaces into safe, vibrant corridors.

Together with our Board, Advisory Council, and donors, we are restoring hope—one community and one flowing river at a time.



Workers constructed the bird watching tower along a Mexicali Fluye drain to connect community members with the returning wildlife.



An Aztec dancer damselfly—damselfly and dragonflies are symbols of a healthy river system and indicate clean water for delicate habitats.

Santa Cruz River program installed Arizona's first trash trap in the Santa Cruz River.

Colorado River Delta program dredged the Rio Hardy to keep flows going.

Growing Water Smart workshops convened communities from Colorado, California, Arizona, Baja California, and Sonora.

Santa Cruz River Research Days hosted a discussion with Senior Director of Programs Francisco Zamora, Dr. Maria-Elena Giner, former U.S. Commissioner of the IBWC and Luis Antonio Rascón Mendoza, of Mexico's CILA.

One Basin

Progress through Perseverance

In his 30 years with the organization, Senior Adviser John Shepard has seen Sonoran Institute weather adversity many times before. “We are still always able to get things done,” he says. Today, John’s work leading our One Basin program puts him at the center of colliding challenges impacting the Colorado River and the 40 million people and natural environment that rely on it.

River flow forecasts for the already struggling Colorado River have been reduced from 17.5 million acre-feet a year to 10 million, portending significant water allocation cuts. Tension between the U.S. and Mexico is straining negotiations over new binational operating guidelines for the river that will replace Minute 323 in 2026. Minute 323 has been critical to our success, in partnership with the Raise the River Coalition, in restoring more than 1,000 acres in the Colorado River Delta. In the U.S., funding cuts to water and infrastructure programs for tribes in the basin significantly affect the work of another key partnership, the Water & Tribes Initiative. “Given these headwinds, our guiding principle is to focus on what we can control and where we can move forward,” John says.

Raise the River Coalition’s Legacy Campaign is one of these areas. Its goals are to permanently protect the Delta and create an endowment to fund restoration and community-building activities in perpetuity. In discussions with the Indigenous Cucapá tribe, the Coalition is seeking a protective designation that will guarantee the tribe’s access, use, and enjoyment of the area’s resources. Efforts are also underway to create a Conservation Trust Fund, an endowment fund that involves stakeholders, including Raise the River Coalition and our local partners, in managing and allocating these funds.

Bolstering all our work in the region is news that Mexico’s government included the Delta as one of the country’s top-three priorities in its national restoration plan.

And despite funding cuts, the Water & Tribes Initiative successfully established the Tribal Water Manager’s Network to nurture peer learning. The partnership also negotiated funding agreements from private donors for two tribes in the basin. “Our response to challenges underscores the resilience of Sonoran Institute and our partners,” John says. “Regardless, we adapt, persevere, and continue to make significant advances toward our goals.”

Board and staff experience the sacred Wack Hikdan restoration site of the Tohono O’odham Nation’s San Xavier District near the banks of the Santa Cruz River.



The annual Santa Cruz River fish survey scientifically tracks the river’s health since water was reintroduced.

Santa Cruz River

Realizing Our Vision in the Santa Cruz River

Our Santa Cruz River program’s vision is a river that flows from Mexico to Marana, Arizona. Today, with 16 years of clean, flowing water, supportive communities, and an expanding program, the outlook for realizing this vision has never been brighter. One year after being included on American Rivers’ annual list of America’s Most Endangered Rivers®, the Santa Cruz is making progress from one end to the other. “With the

The Santa Cruz River near the U.S.–Mexico border

Santa Cruz River Program, we are seeing hope restored in real time,” says Santa Cruz River Program Director Luke Cole.

The effort we and our coalition partners spearheaded to establish a National Wildlife Refuge throughout the river corridor has reached the final administrative stage. With the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s endorsement of the coalition’s conservation plan, we and our partners are now developing a Land Protection Plan for the Department of Interior’s final approval.

At the river’s southern end, a federal grant from the Water Infrastructure Finance Authority of Arizona is supporting several Sonoran Institute projects in Santa Cruz County and along the U.S.–Mexico border. One is an economic analysis that will determine the river’s environmental and societal value. Simultaneously, a Santa Cruz River Restoration Master Plan will identify opportunities for restoration based on current river flow and scenarios envisioning increased water levels. Combined, these studies will calculate the economic worth and restoration potential of water in the river.

“Our goal is not only to connect people to these natural resources, but to understand the importance and value, economic or otherwise, of the river to the wildlife and people who use it,” Luke says.

While the Mexico and Marana ends of the Santa Cruz flow with the addition of treated wastewater, its middle section historically runs dry. Thanks to research conducted with support from the Bureau of Reclamation, we made the case to change this. Our study found that high-quality wastewater could restore flow in this arid section as well. The nearby Green Valley Water Reclamation Facility has the clean effluent and infrastructure to restore about .75 miles of flow today, and up to six miles with modifications. Convinced, Pima County has begun the permitting process to release water and get the Middle Santa Cruz flowing.



Thank You to Our Donors

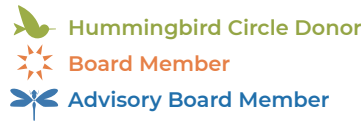
We are grateful to all our donors, partners, and volunteers. With your support the Sonoran Institute continues to make a positive impact throughout the Colorado River Basin.

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The Loft Cinema
Tito and Pep
Trader Joe's
Tucson Botanical Gardens
Whiskey Del Bac
Whole Foods Market

Financial Summary

Revenue and Support

Contributions	\$ 831,162
Foundation Grants	\$ 1,082,554
Government Grants	\$ 2,212,930
Contract Income	\$ 395,402
Other Income	\$ 266,641

Total Revenue and Support \$ 4,788,689

Expenses

Programs US	\$ 1,641,792
Programs MEX	\$ 2,591,301
Administration	\$ 428,724
Fundraising & Marketing	\$ 352,590

Total Expenses \$ 5,014,408

Reporting based on audited FY25 results. A copy of the audit will be posted on our website as soon as it becomes available.

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Here are a few ways you can make a difference for future generations:

Donate

For easy access, we have included a remittance envelope. Or, give online at sonoraninstitute.org.

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You'll have fun, meet great people, and learn more about our important work.

Follow Us on Social Media

We're on: Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, LinkedIn, and YouTube.

Spread Our News With Your Friends and Family

The more who hear about us the greater our impact.

Our Mission

The Sonoran Institute's mission is to connect people and communities with the natural resources that nourish and sustain them.

Our Vision

A Colorado River Basin where rivers flow, landscapes are healthy, and all communities thrive.



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