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Contact: Nicole Patterson

nicole@pattersonpublicaffairs.com | [602.316.1343](tel:602.316.1343)

A New Landmark Water Initiative, Verde River Exchange, Will Celebrate its Impact in Sedona on Dec. 2

Brings Businesses and Residents Together to Help Reduce Water Use

SEDONA, Arizona (November 22, 2016) — A groundbreaking initiative is aiming to preserve our most valuable asset through collaboration and cooperation between non-profits, businesses and residents. The shared goal: protect the Verde River, Oak Creek, and Arizona's future water supplies.

Friends of Verde River Greenway and its partners are teaming up with Arizona winemakers, residents, and businesses to establish the Verde River Exchange. The Exchange connects residents and businesses in the Verde Valley willing to temporarily reduce their water use with others seeking to offset the impacts of their groundwater pumping. The collaborative project offers potential to reverse the decline of water levels and bolster river flows while promoting sustainable economic development.

A reception to celebrate the establishment of the initiative and its recent selection as a finalist for the Arizona Water Innovation Challenge will take place from 5 to 7 p.m. on Friday, Dec. 2 at the L'Auberge de Sedona Resort in Sedona.

Three years in the making, the Exchange includes among its funders and partners, The Nature Conservancy of Arizona, the Walton Family Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund, the Bonneville Environmental Foundation (BEF), the Arizona Community Foundation, as well as Friends of Verde River Greenway.

"This is an innovative way to find solutions that truly make a difference to this important watershed while protecting the interests of local businesses and residents," said Todd Reeve, Chief Executive Officer of the Bonneville Environmental Foundation. "The Verde River Exchange is an example of how public-private partnerships can work across the country to preserve water flows in an economically responsible way."

State Senator Sylvia Allen, whose district includes much of the Verde Valley, said the initiative has been a welcome contribution to the area's environmental health and economic future.

“The Verde River Exchange shows that we truly can work together to address critical issues such as the future of our rivers and streams,” she said. “I am very pleased to see the positive contribution of this initiative to the people of my district and to our state as a whole.”

In the first set of pilot projects, a local irrigator agreed to forego the irrigation of pasture area for one year, generating water credits that will partially offset the use of groundwater by Merkin Vineyards and Page Springs Vineyards. The two vineyards, in turn, purchased the water offset credits, providing revenue that can be used to compensate the local irrigator. Page Springs Cellars and Vineyards overlooks Oak Creek, a beautiful tributary of the Verde known for the canyon it carved outside of Sedona. It is Oak Creek that will benefit from this first transaction of the exchange.

The two vineyards use water-efficient drip systems to irrigate grapes for their wines, as part of their commitment to water conservation. The Verde River Exchange allows them to enhance their water conservation and preserve more water for the river. The vineyards’ purchase of water credits will offset the impact of irrigating about nine acres of grapes each year.

Arizona is a desert state where rivers and streams are rare resources. Some 35% of the Arizona river miles that once flowed freely year-round no longer do. In the Verde Valley, the Verde River is a crucial resource for communities, businesses, and the ecosystem. But as populations grow, so does the demand for water. Without innovation and action, water levels and river flows will continue to decline. While Arizona is often praised in water circles for its pioneering 1980 groundwater management act, the law only applies to five “active management areas,” including Tucson and Phoenix. Groundwater pumping in regions outside of those designated areas, including the Verde Valley, remains largely unrestricted.

The Verde River, a stunning ribbon of green that winds 195 miles from spring-fed headwaters north of Prescott to the greater Phoenix area, is one of Arizona’s few remaining healthy river systems. Arizona’s only federally designated Wild and Scenic River, the Verde River springs from the ground in the rural community of Paulden, southwest of Flagstaff. From its emergence at Sullivan Lake, it meanders southeastward through private, federal, state and tribal land before reaching its confluence with the Salt River near Phoenix.

The Verde River Exchange pilot was named a finalist in the recent Water Innovation Challenge sponsored by the Arizona Community Foundation, Republic Media, and the Morrison Institute for Public Policy. For more information, visit www.verderiverexchange.org.

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