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**COMMUNITY PARTNERS TEAM UP TO LAUNCH “VERDE RIVER EXCHANGE” WATER “OFFSET” PROGRAM**

**Project Aims to Protect Verde River by Connecting Credit “Sellers” and “Buyers”**

COTTONWOOD, AZ -- A new water conservation program aimed at protecting the free-flowing waters of the Verde River officially kicks off Thursday, July 21, 2016 in Cottonwood, AZ. The **Verde River Exchange Water Offset Program**, or “Verde River Exchange” for short, is a collaborative effort among Friends of Verde River Greenway (FVRG) and a diverse group of partners. The program connects Verde Valley homes and businesses willing to temporarily reduce their water usage – or potential credit “sellers” – with groundwater users seeking to reduce the impacts of their continuing use – or potential “buyers.” Two area vineyards – Merkin Vineyards and Page Spring Vineyards -- and a local family are piloting the program in its inaugural year.

Although groundwater makes up almost half of Arizona’s water supply, research shows water levels are consistently dropping in many parts of the state. Currently 35 percent of Arizona river miles that once flowed freely year-round no longer do. The Verde River also faces long-term threats from increased dependence on groundwater pumping.

“Groundwater pumping in much of the Verde River Watershed is subject to little or no restriction,” said Chip Norton, President of Friends of Verde River Greenway, the not-for-profit responsible for launching the Verde River Exchange. “As the population grows, so does the demand for water. There are few tools for communities to manage its use, and so we believe the Verde River Exchange is launching at an opportune time.”

The Verde River Exchange offers groundwater users an avenue to reduce impacts to the Verde River by allowing them to purchase offset “credits.” Willing water users, or “sellers,” voluntarily agree to refrain from using a certain quantity of water for a defined period of time, and the reduction is translated into a Water Offset Credit. A “buyer” who wishes to reduce

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their “water footprint” pays for the Water Offset Credit generated by the seller. The Verde River Exchange matches these buyers and sellers, and in so doing creates a voluntary mitigation program for Verde Valley water used.

 In the program’s inaugural pilot projects, Page Springs Vineyards and Merkin Vineyards have each agreed to purchase Water Offset Credits in 2016, offsetting the impact of groundwater use associated with almost ten acres of vineyard. “The river is truly the lifeblood of the Valley,” said Eric Glomski, owner and winemaker at Page Springs Cellars and Vineyards. “Winemakers are by their very essence connected to the land,” said James Keenan of Caduceus Cellars and Merkin Vineyards.

The program was developed in partnership with and funded by The Nature Conservancy, The Walton Family Foundation, Environmental Defense Fund and Bonneville Environmental Foundation. FVRG serves as the administrator of the program, with the guidance of a local advisory council. “We are delighted to be working with so many good partners, and with Verde Valley landowners and businesses who have stepped up to be leaders in shared stewardship of the watershed,” said Kim Schonek of The Nature Conservancy’s Arizona chapter.

“If nothing is done, area water levels and river flows will potentially continue to decline,” said Jocelyn Gibbon, a key organizer of the Verde River Exchange and principal of Freshwater Policy Consulting, an organization that provides support to organizations interested in water and natural resource policy and sustainability. “As a community we have the potential to shift this outcome, preserve a flowing river and protect water supplies, while still promoting sustainable economic development. We are so excited to be working with community leaders on this project.”

Friends of Verde River Greenway (FVRG) is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit based in Cottonwood, Arizona. Its mission is to restore, protect, and promote the natural, cultural, scenic, and recreational resources of the Verde River and its tributaries. FVRG works on a range of programs that include habitat improvement, channel restoration, flow restoration, sustainable river recreation, and community outreach. For more information about the Verde River Exchange program, visit [www.verderiverexchange.org](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5CMonique%5CDesktop%5Cwww.verderiverexchange.org) or contact Jocelyn Gibbon at (602) 908-7818 or jocelyn@freshwaterpolicy.com.

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