



With Federal Protections Under Threat, Arizona Needs To Be Ready to Protect Our Waters

On Its 50th Anniversary, the Clean Water Act Could Soon Be Gutted

If you ask someone what they think of Arizona, they'll likely dream up an image of huge saguaro cacti, scorching temperatures, and dry, cracked landscapes. Arizonans know that this state is more than that. Arizona has diverse geography, over 800 native bird, reptile and mammal species, and 8,101 miles of streams that provide drinking water to over three million people.

Though those streams are often far beyond our sealed homes and paved neighborhoods, they are the lifeblood of Arizona. With recent news about cutbacks to the Colorado River, which provides water to over 40 million people in Arizona, water is at the forefront of most Arizonans' minds.

50 years ago, U.S. water was descending into an industrial stew, fueled by the post-war economic boom. New homes, entire neighborhoods, city blocks, and factories were erected.

In just two decades after the war, 7.6 million acres of wetlands — an area roughly the size of Maryland — were destroyed in the lower 48 states — Arizona included. Toxic waste and sewage were dumped, untreated, into the nearest convenient stream. A series of high-profile river fires — yes, rivers on fire — helped push Congress to act.

Passed with sweeping bipartisan support exactly 50 years ago this week, few laws have been as transformative to people's quality of life as the Clean Water Act.

It is thanks to the Act that Arizona's intermittent and ephemeral streams are protected. Intermittent streams are those that flow regularly, but not always year-round, and ephemeral streams flow only after heavy rains. 79% of the total Arizona streams that provide drinking water are made up of these types of streams so their importance cannot be overstated.

While its implementation has [faced continuous struggles](#) over the years, the ongoing protective importance of the Act is crucial. The Act, according to a [new report](#) from the National Wildlife Federation, has helped to restore dumping grounds into productive, healthy waterways, kept areas safe for fishing and swimming, and increased fish and fish-dependent populations like Arizona river otters.

Today, its National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System program alone prevents 700 billion pounds of pollutants from entering our waters annually. Without the protection of Arizona waters, critical species like the Apache Trout that only live in coldwater streams in the White Mountains are threatened. Likewise, we risk losing continued recreational use of streams by anglers and outdoor enthusiasts — activities that provide \$13.5 billion to the state's economy and support 114,000 jobs, according to a report released by [Audubon Arizona](#).

Now, in a particularly cruel bit of timing, precisely on the Act's 50th anniversary, the Supreme Court is hearing a case that could gut it. In *Sackett v. EPA*, a radical opponent of clean water is seeking to withdraw the Act's longstanding protections for roughly half the nation's streams and wetlands. In Arizona, 6,381 miles of streams could lose protections.

What's at stake is the integrity, and in many cases very existence, of streams and wetlands that provide flood control, recharge waters during drought, filter pollution, provide habitat, and are used recreationally by many Arizonans. These streams are themselves the lifeblood of larger rivers and lakes in Arizona — without them, we risk losing even more of Arizona's water.

Arizona has been in a drought for over two decades and temperatures continue to rise year-to-year. *Sackett v. EPA* is a threat to healthy natural water systems.

If the plaintiffs succeed, it will be open season for the federally unregulated pollution and destruction of many of Arizona's important waters. The results would be catastrophic. A large portion of Arizona's flood-absorbent wetlands — and at least half of the nation's — would be at risk of being filled in and paved over. Upstream waterways that store and filter water could be erased from the landscape, worsening droughts and water quality.

These impacts will hit frontline communities hardest. Decades of under-investment in drinking water and proper treatment of waste means communities that have already historically faced a disproportionate share of flooding and water pollution, will have to bear the brunt of this ruling.

Clearly, the Supreme Court needs to honor the intent of Congress "to restore and maintain the chemical, physical, and biological integrity of the Nation's waters." But Arizona also needs to prepare for the worst. If federal protections are withdrawn from our streams and wetlands, state and local authorities need to step in and protect the integrity of our waters.

If we don't, the degradation of the landscape outside our homes will not only destroy already weakened habitats, it will foul the drinking water and flood the homes of our most vulnerable. We can't allow Arizona to go back to an era where toxic waste and asphalt killed our most vital waters.

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The [Arizona Wildlife Federation](#) is a non-profit organization dedicated to educating, inspiring, and assisting individuals and organizations to value, conserve, enhance, manage, and protect wildlife and wildlife habitat. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Instagram](#)