

# THE CASE FOR REINVESTING IN THE GILA RIVER VALLEY ARROYOS WATERSHED

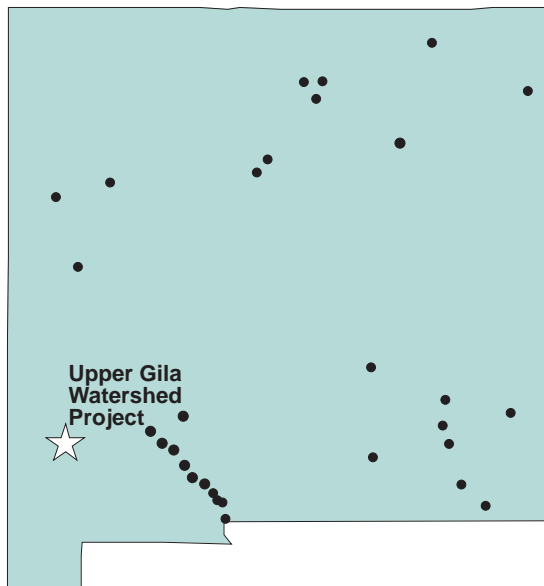


**THE SITUATION: 35-YEAR-OLD DAMS IN THE GILA RIVER VALLEY ARE FILLING WITH SEDIMENT, POSING A POTENTIAL HAZARD TO THE COMMUNITIES THAT DEPEND ON THIS WATERSHED**

In the early 1960s, 12 dams were installed to provide protection to farm land and surrounding area in the Upper Gila River Valley. In addition, many other benefits that have now become evident over the past several years.

These benefits, now of major interest to local residents, numerous environmental groups, and users of the area, include: improved water quality and wildlife habitat, including that for threatened and endangered species; improved groundwater recharge; improved riparian corridors; and numerous social benefits.

The 12 dams have provided all of these benefits, but are now reaching the end of their planned life. They are filling with sediment and some present a hazard from potential failure. In addition, many of the benefits are now threatened to be lost and significant adverse impacts are on the horizon.



*12 floodwater dams were installed under the PL-566 program to provide flood and sediment damage protection to farm land and surrounding area in the Upper Gila River Valley. This project is one of thirty PL-566 Small Watershed Projects in New Mexico. In the thirty watershed projects there are 74 floodwater retarding dams.*



## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

- Size:** About 30,000 acres in Grant County
- Number of dams:** 12
- Project start:** 1959
- Project end:** 2009
- Primary purpose:** control excessive sediment and floodwater, protect cropland, irrigation systems, and roads
- Population served:** 1,500



## PARTNERS

- Grant Soil and Water Conservation District
- Upper Gila Flood Watershed District
- United States Department of Agriculture-Natural Resources Conservation Service

## The Bottom Line:

**WITHOUT UPGRADING THESE DAMS, THE GILA RIVER VALLEY IS MISSING OUT ON OPPORTUNITIES TO KEEP COMMUNITIES ALIVE, FARM-LAND PROSPEROUS, AND IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF THE WATERSHED.**

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*“The Upper Gila Watershed Project is a part of the basic fabric of our community...Maintenance of these dams is critical to our community.”*

**Duston L. Hunt, Jr.**  
Local rancher

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## THE GILA RIVER VALLEY WATERSHED: AN INVESTMENT WORTH PROTECTING

The initial federal cost for construction of these 12 dams was approximately \$1,400,000 (current dollars). The watershed is realizing approximately \$37,000 in benefits each year or about \$4 annually for each dollar that was invested in 1960 when the investment is distributed over the past 39 years.

The intangible benefits are numerous and not easily quantified in dollars. The Gila River protected by these structures is a high value resource in this part of the state. It contains several threatened and endangered species and provides fishing, hunting, wildlife watching, and hiking opportunities to local residents and numerous visitors.

The irrigated valley along the river contains several limited resource farming operations and the communities of Cliff and Gila. The health of the watershed and river is of extreme social benefit to the people who reside in this area.

The river is experiencing abnormally high runoff rates, excessive sedimentation, bank erosion, and loss of riparian corridor zones and water quality due to deteriorated upper watershed conditions that have occurred over the past 40 years. Had it not been for these twelve dams, the situation would be much worse today.



## THE “GILA MONSTER” LOOKS TOWARD THE FUTURE

There is a tremendous opportunity to partner with the sponsors, local landowners, communities, nature groups, universities, and other agencies to restore this treasured and limited resource. One very large group interested in facilitating partnering is the “Gila Monster,” made up of several Soil and Water Conservation Districts, agencies, private land owners, nature groups and other interested parties in the states of New Mexico and Arizona.

This organization is providing a forum and coordination for the overall Gila River drainage and problems of erosion and bank protection in the upper reaches, and extreme sediment deposition and flooding on the lower reaches in Arizona, on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Implementation funding, for all partners, is now however a significant and limited resource. Intrinsic and critical to all of these efforts and partnering opportunities is funding for the restoration of the benefits of the twelve dams.







*The native wild Gila trout of the Upper Gila River. Protected by fishing regulations, but now found primarily only in the upper reaches of the watershed because of warming waters from continual loss of critical riparian corridors and ground water recharge that feeds cold water to the river.*



## IF ACTION IS NOT TAKEN, ALL WILL BE LOST

Currently, three of the twelve dams are totally full of sediment and have already lost these benefits; the other nine will be full of sediment and lose their benefits also in the very near future. One of them nearly overtopped in 1989 and the earth emergency spillway was severely damaged. Two of them are protecting homes which will also be damaged if that occurs.

If no action is taken, the following benefits will be lost:

-  flood, sediment, and erosion control
-  water quality
-  wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered species
-  riparian benefits

One of the key state issues in New Mexico is water resource improvement and protection, both quantity and quality. All of NRCS's existing and planned PL-566 projects provide these benefits.

If the benefits are not restored, a decrease in the water quality of the Gila river will occur along with increased flooding, excessive bank erosion and sediment damages, and potential damages to already critical habitat to threatened and endangered species such as the willow-fly catcher, the native Gila trout, and others.

Congressional support to restore PL-566 Small Watershed Program allocations is needed to partner with others on the Gila River and many many other watersheds throughout the nation.



