

## Developer, Contractor Agree to Settle Clean Water Act Violations Along Santa Cruz River

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Tucson, Arizona - An Arizona land developer and a contractor have agreed to settle alleged violations of the Clean Water Act for bulldozing, filling, and diverting approximately five miles of the Santa Cruz River, a major waterway in Arizona, the Justice Department and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced today.

According to the settlement, Scottsdale, Arizona-based developer George H. Johnson, his companies Johnson International, Inc.; and General Hunt Properties, Inc.; and land-clearing contractor, 3-F Contracting, Inc. will pay a combined \$1.25 million civil penalty. The penalty is the largest obtained in the history of EPA's Pacific Southwest Region, and one of the largest in EPA's history, under Section 404 of the Clean Water Act, which protects against the unauthorized filling of federally protected waterways through a permit program administered jointly by EPA and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The settlement resolves a Clean Water Act complaint filed in 2005 by the Justice Department and EPA against Johnson and his companies for clearing and filling an extensive stretch of the lower Santa Cruz River and a major tributary, the Los Robles Wash, without a permit from the Corps of Engineers.

"A seven-figure penalty in this type of enforcement case is virtually unprecedented," said Ronald J. Tenpas, Assistant Attorney General for the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division. "It underscores the Justice Department's commitment to enforce the nation's laws that protect valuable water resources in Arizona and other arid western states, and to hold violators of those laws accountable."

"The Santa Cruz River is a gem in Arizona's crown, as it flows from Arizona to Mexico back into Arizona, sustaining life, habitat for animals and plants, and providing so many benefits for residents of southern Arizona," said Alexis Strauss, director of EPA's Water Division for the Pacific Southwest Region. "This settlement reflects both the strong emphasis EPA places on protecting this important watershed and the seriousness of the alleged violations."

"Today's action contributes to EPA's record-shattering enforcement results," said Granta Nakayama, assistant administrator for EPA's Office of Enforcement and Compliance Assurance. "To date, EPA has concluded enforcement actions requiring polluters to spend an estimated \$11 billion on pollution controls, clean-up and environmental projects, an all time record for EPA. After these activities are completed, EPA expects annual pollution reductions of more than three billion pounds."

The alleged violations occurred in 2003 and early 2004, when defendants bulldozed 2000 acres of the historic King Ranch and La Osa Ranch in Pinal County, Ariz. The bulldozed areas lie within the largest active floodplain of the lower Santa Cruz River, which meanders through the two ranches in natural braids, a rarity for this heavily channelized waterway. Prior to defendants' land-clearing activities, this stretch of the Santa Cruz River supported a rich variety of vegetation, including one of the few extensive mesquite forests remaining in Arizona's Sonoran Desert region. These areas form a critical corridor for wildlife to move along the Santa Cruz River and from Picacho Peak State Park to the Ironwood Forest National Monument.

The case was referred to EPA by the Corps of Engineers after concerned citizens,

tribes, and local, state and federal agencies complained about the serious flooding dangers and ecological impacts in connection with defendants' land-clearing activities. The Johnson defendants sold the ranches in 2004.

The proposed consent decree, lodged in the U.S. District Court in Phoenix, is subject to a 30-day comment period and final court approval.