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Mayor
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Madam Chair, for the record my name is Jackie Meck. I am the Mayor of the City of Buckeye, which is in central Arizona. Thank you for having me here today to testify on a matter that is very important to our community.

I am a Buckeye native. When I was growing up, Buckeye's population was never more than 1,200 and that may have included cats, dogs and chickens. Now we expect to have over 100,000 people in this year's census count. According to the Census Bureau, Buckeye is the fastest growing city in the country with a population over 50,000.

As a child, my friends and I spent a lot of our free time in the Gila River hiking, fishing and hunting. Back then, the river was bordered by tall mesquite, willow and cottonwood trees. In those days we could get near the water without much effort. Now, getting to the water is a challenge as very little water remains, and the Salt Cedars are so dense, you cannot move more than a few feet into where they are growing.

Salt Cedars are an invasive species that have proliferated the Gila River and many other rivers in Arizona. They were planted along river banks in the late 1800's to control erosion.

Unfortunately, what was planned to help stabilize the banks of the river has actually put our community, wildlife, critical infrastructure and an important water source to a growing community, in danger.

Salt Cedar trees have congested more than 15,000 acres in and along the Gila River inside the planning areas of the Cities of Buckeye, Goodyear and Avondale. In the 18 mile stretch of the Gila River that we are trying to restore, Salt Cedars have consumed hundreds of thousands of acre feet of water, decimated wildlife habitat, fueled wildfires, congested the flow of the river expanding the floodplain, and in the process of all that created an unsightly monoculture.

Each Salt Cedar tree consumes 200 to 300 gallons of water a day. Eradicating Salt Cedars in the 15,000 acres that we are concerned with, creates a water resource in the desert with the potential to save 50,000 acre-feet of water annually. That is enough water for 200,000 homes or 600,000 people.

Salt Cedars out-compete the native tree species that provide habitat to over 150 species of birds. One of those species of birds is endangered, the Southwest Willow Flycatcher.

Compounding the problem of Salt Cedars eliminating wildlife habitat, is the Tamarisk Beetle. The Tamarisk Beetle was introduced in Colorado by the federal government as a biological control for Salt Cedar trees. Unfortunately the beetle defoliates the Salt Cedars during the hottest time of the year exposing the Flycatcher's eggs and hatchlings to the sun, killing them. Buckeye expects the arrival of the Tamarisk Beetle within the next two years.

Salt Cedars are highly flammable (Figures B & C), putting surrounding homes and critical public facilities, like the State Route 85 Bridge, in jeopardy. On average, that bridge carries 12,000 vehicles daily traveling to and from San Diego, Yuma, and Rocky Point.

The high density of Salt Cedars has congested the Gila River, impeding flood flows and creating the potential for a backwater effect aggravating the impact of an already flood-prone area.

Pending floodplain delineations (Figure A) to the Gila River will add 4,500 acres of floodplain in our community. This will limit development and require costly flood insurance for those land owners who have already built, and could threaten the operation and existence of Buckeye's \$40 million waste water treatment plant (Figure D) which sits inside the floodplain expansion.

Ladies and gentlemen, the only solution to this problem is to -

1. remove the Salt Cedars,
2. restore the land with native vegetation creating habitat for threatened and endangered species before the beetle's arrival, and
3. build levees to protect our homes, farmland, and critical infrastructure.

Members of the committee, here is what the federal government can do to help us –

1. Provide best practices and expert advice so we do not have to learn from our mistakes.
2. Support the DRIP Act (H.R. 5100 & S.2862).
The DRIP Act is a bipartisan bill establishing an annual \$10 million competitive grant program within the Department of Agriculture to alleviate challenges posed by salt cedars and other nonnative plants in riparian areas.
3. Increase funding for the Army Corps' Continuing Authorities Program under Sections 205 and 206 so we can protect our critical infrastructure.
4. Dedicate resources in the Army Corps of Engineers, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the US Fish and Wildlife Service to support and track projects and assist local agencies through the process; and finally,
5. Support methods of expediting and streamlining access to the Nationwide #27 (404) permits so we can remove invasive species ourselves.

Madam Chair that concludes my comments. Thank you again for the opportunity to be here today.

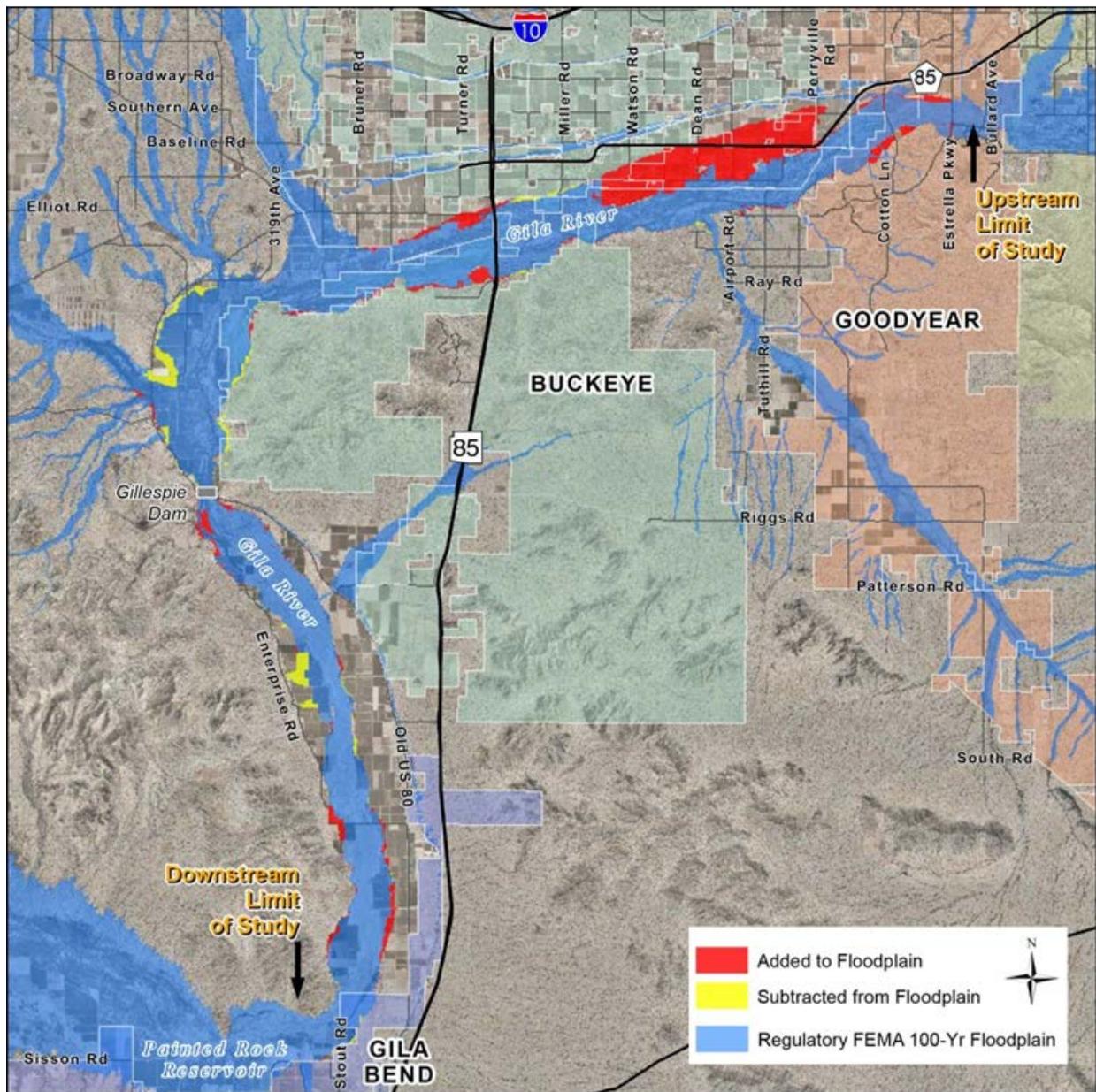


Figure A – Expansion of the Floodplain



Figure B – Salt Cedars burning in the Gila River



Figure C – What's left of the Salt Cedars after a fire and before they rejuvenate.

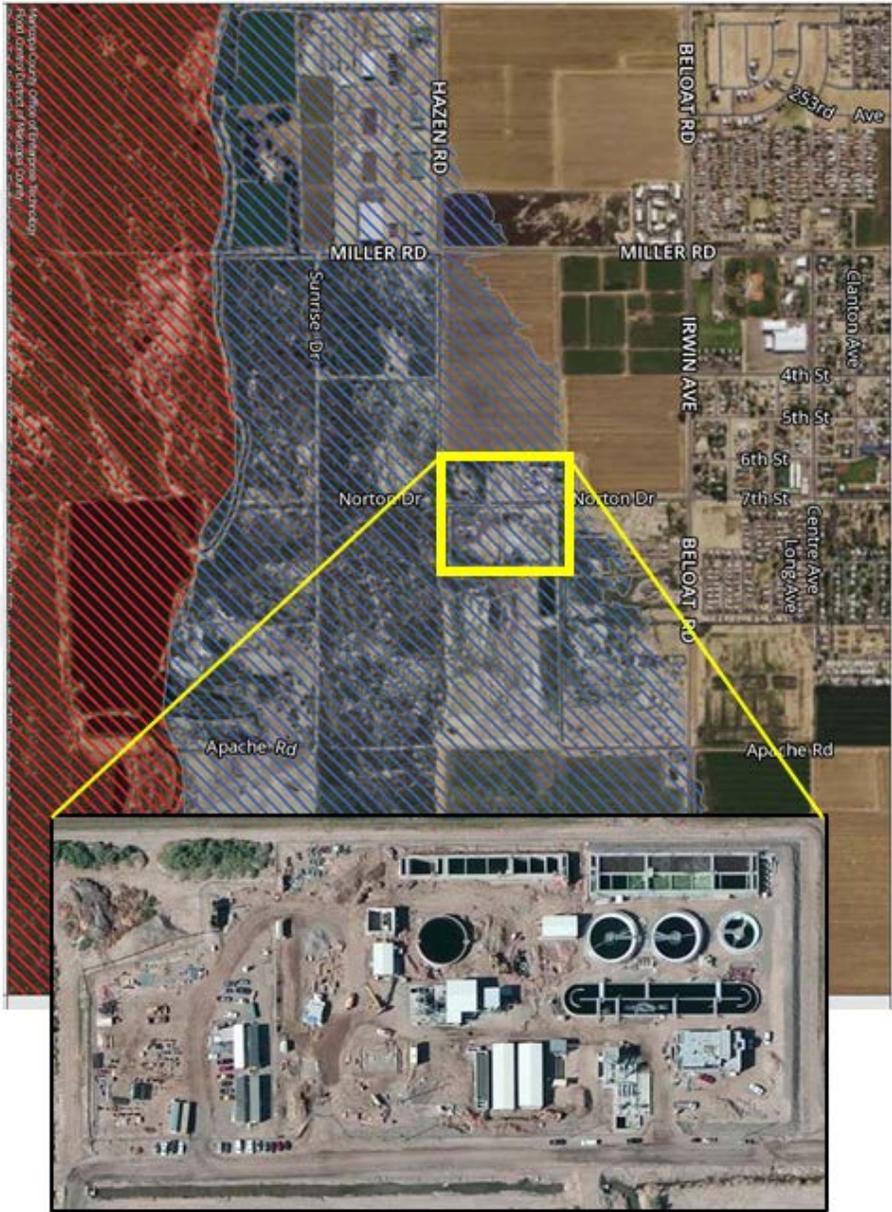


Figure D – Buckeye’s \$40M waste water treatment plant inside the new floodplain