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News Release

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County Attorney Organizes Effort to Restore Riparian Refuge *State Game and Fish, Avondale and Goodyear Police Join Initiative to Prosecute Polluters*

County Attorney Andrew Thomas and state and local law-enforcement officials have joined forces to prosecute polluters and take other measures to restore the endangered Tres Rios Riparian Refuge to ecological health.

After consulting with state and local law-enforcement leaders, Thomas and his office prepared a written protocol to ensure investigation and prosecution of illegal dumping, trespassing and other crimes in the Tres Rios refuge. Joining Thomas in signing this protocol were State Game and Fish Director Larry Voyles, Avondale Police Chief Kevin Kotsur, and Goodyear Police Chief Mark Brown.

This partnership to restore Tres Rios comes after Thomas learned of the problem from an article in the *Arizona Republic* in July. The County Attorney's Office subsequently reached out to law enforcement to undertake several steps to clean up the polluted area.

A hidden jewel in the Valley that is a reminder of Arizona's past, Tres Rios is the confluence of the Salt, Gila and Agua Fria Rivers in the west Valley. This wildlife refuge is home to cottonwood, willow, salt cedar, seep willow and other plants that can only thrive in riparian areas. Animals such as hawks, osprey, peregrine falcons, the desert tortoise, beavers, bobcats and javelina make their homes in this area.

Sadly, the Tres Rios Refuge has become a dumping ground for transients, smugglers of drugs and humans, and other criminal offenders. They leave behind trash that has choked the riparian habitat, including tires, abandoned cars, and cattle carcasses. In addition, illegal fishing, poaching and weapons violations are commonplace. The protocol announced today will coordinate law enforcement efforts to clean up the area and send a message that county prosecutors will prosecute poachers, polluters and vandals.

The plan includes:

- Stepped up patrols
- Investigating criminal activity in the area

- Specialized prosecution dealing with polluters
- Community cleanups
- New signage alerting the public to the rules as well as how to report polluters

The first stage of this cleanup effort will be targeting the source of the problem: polluters, trespassers, illegal hunters and fishers, and criminals who leave behind gang graffiti or steal trees. Prosecutors also will aggressively prosecute those who threaten law-enforcement officers or other visitors to the area, which becomes dangerous after dark.

It is hoped that new signage will be posted on the perimeters of the refuge in the next 60 days. Once posted, these new signs will be shared with the public and the media to deter criminal offenders from entering and damaging the area and to publicize the problem.

Finally, Thomas will work with Game and Fish, local police, and community organizations to organize and seek public support for a cleanup effort in the spring.

At a press conference in front of the refuge, Thomas stated, "Because of polluters and other criminals, this hidden jewel behind me has lost some of its luster. But working together, we can restore it."

He added, "Tres Rios is a unique and gorgeous habitat for wildlife here in the Valley. We must prosecute those who pollute this refuge, remove the trash they've left behind, and protect this area once and for all from future damage. By doing this, we can ensure Tres Rios becomes a one-of-a-kind recreation area that all law-abiding citizens can enjoy."

Goodyear Police Chief Mark Brown stated, "The residents of Goodyear and the west valley are fortunate to have these resources. We are committed to protecting them from polluters and criminals who threaten the natural beauty of these treasured landscapes."

"We're excited about this cooperative effort to enhance the Gila River corridor and its unique riparian environment in the Southwest Valley," said Game and Fish Director Larry Voyles. "We hope our work together will make this area, which includes the Base and Meridian Wildlife Area and annual Tres Rios Nature Festival, an enjoyable destination experience for the community, families and other visitors."

Avondale Police Chief Kevin Kotsur stated, "Avondale is excited about the partnership initiated by the County Attorney's Office under Andrew Thomas's direction and we look forward to the cleanup effort and the ongoing enforcement effort to maintain this riparian area."

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