

AGENCY RECEIPT

NOTICE OF PROPOSED RULEMAKING

1. Agency name:

Department of Environmental Quality

2. Chapter number and heading:

Chapter 11. Department of Environmental Quality – Water Quality Standards

3. Code Citation for the Chapter:

18 A.A.C. 11

4. Any Subchapter, if applicable; Article; Part, if applicable; and Section involved in the rulemaking, listed in alphabetical and numerical order:

Article, Part, or Section Affected (as applicable)

R18-11-112

Rulemaking Action

Amend

AGENCY CERTIFICATE

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Department of Environmental Quality

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Chapter 11. Department of Environmental Quality

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R18-11-112

Rulemaking Action

Amend

5. **The rules contained in this rulemaking package are true and correct as proposed.**

6.



Signature of agency chief executive officer in ink*

1/22/26

Date signed

Karen Peters

Typed name of signer*

Director

Title of signer

NOTICE OF PROPOSED RULEMAKING

TITLE 18. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

CHAPTER 11. DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY – WATER QUALITY STANDARDS

PREAMBLE

- 1. Permission to proceed with this proposed rulemaking was granted under A.R.S. § 41-1039 by the governor on:**
September 29, 2025 and Monday, January 5 2026
- 2. Article, Part, or Section Affected (as applicable)** **Rulemaking Action**
R18-11-112 Amend
- 3. Citations to the agency’s statutory rulemaking authority to include the authorizing statute (general) and the implementing statute (specific):**
Authorizing statute: A.R.S. § 49-104(B)(4)
Implementing statute: A.R.S. §§ 49-203(A)(1), 49-221, 49-222
- 4. Citations to all related notices published in the Register that pertain to the current record of the proposed rule:**
Notice of Rulemaking Docket Opening: 31 A.A.R. 4051, Issue Date: Oct. 17, 2025, Issue Number: 42
- 5. The agency’s contact person who can answer questions about the rulemaking:**

Name: Jonathan Quinsey
Title: Legal Specialist
Division: Water Quality
Address: 1110 W. Washington St, Phoenix, AZ 85007
Telephone: (602) 771-8193
Email: quinsey.jonathan@azdeq.gov
Website: azdeq.gov
- 6. An agency’s justification and reason why a rule should be made, amended, repealed or renumbered, to include an explanation about the rulemaking:**

A. General Explanation of the Rulemaking

In this Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM), the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality (ADEQ) is proposing to amend Arizona Administrative Code (A.A.C.) R18-11-112(G) to designate specified portions of the Upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek (referred to as “the nominated reaches” throughout this NPRM) as Outstanding Arizona Waters (OAWs). Designating these surface waters as OAWs is the highest-level of protection that ADEQ assigns to surface waters. This designation recognizes that the nominated reaches have extraordinary ecological, recreational, and cultural significance and ensures long-term protection of the value these surface waters provide to local communities, recreational users, and threatened and endangered species.

ADEQ’s authority to establish and enforce water quality standards is established in Arizona law and tied to federal requirements. Arizona Revised Statutes (A.R.S.) § 49-221(A) authorizes the ADEQ Director to adopt water quality standards by rule, while A.R.S. § 49-222(A) requires those standards to assure protection of navigable waters consistent with the Clean Water Act (CWA). ADEQ implements the

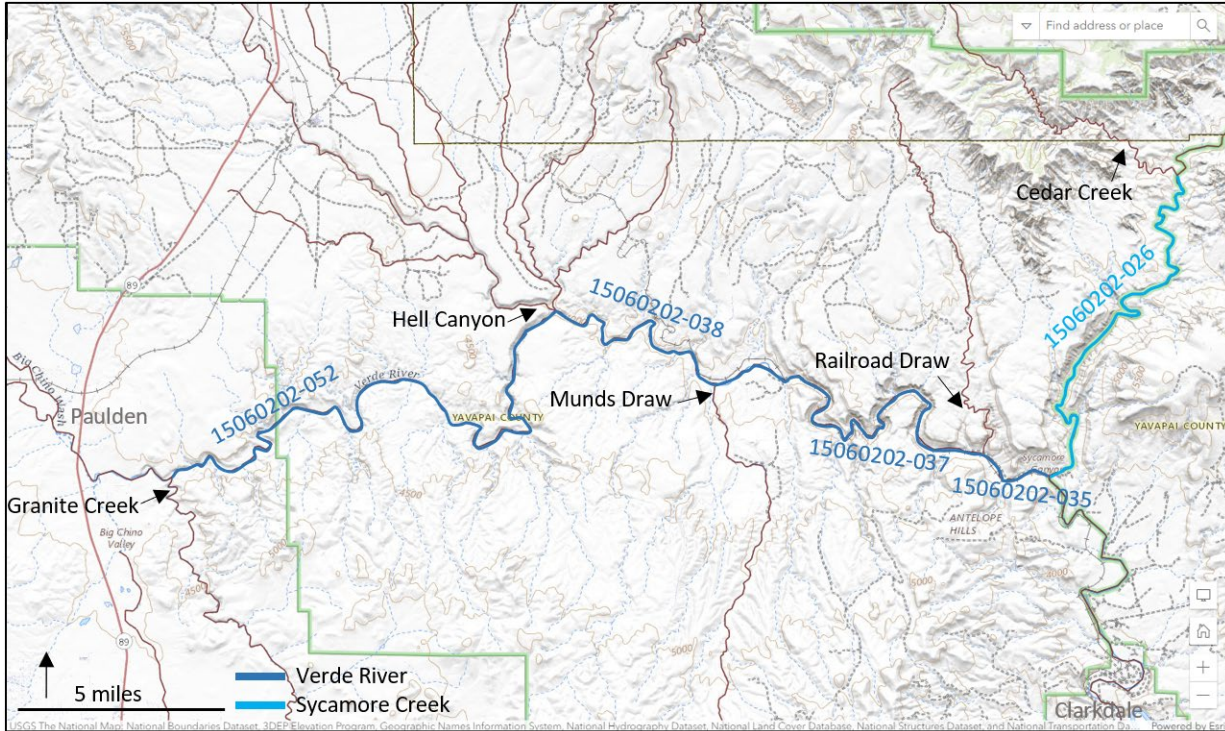
antidegradation policy required by the CWA through its surface water quality standards in A.A.C. R18-11-107 and R18-11-112. These rules establish procedures to maintain existing water quality, protect high-quality waters, and designate OAWs for Tier 3 protection, ensuring consistency with 40 C.F.R. § 131.12.

The CWA antidegradation regulation in 40 C.F.R. § 131.12 establishes three tiers of water quality protection. Tier 1 provides fundamental protection of existing uses by requiring that water quality be maintained and not further degraded in any waterbody where the current quality fails to meet applicable standards. Tier 2 safeguards “high-quality” waters whose conditions are better than the minimum standard. In these waters, any lowering of water quality is tightly restricted and may only be allowed if it is shown to be necessary for important economic or social development. Tier 3 is the most stringent protection, reserved for waters of exceptional ecological or recreational significance.

Under federal law, Tier 3 waters are called Outstanding Natural Resource Waters (ONRWs), whereas Arizona designates them as OAWs pursuant to R18-11-112. An OAW receives the highest level of antidegradation protection – Tier 3. The water quality of an OAW must be preserved at existing levels and cannot be lowered, except for short-term, temporary impacts. OAW protection ensures that these designated surface waters maintain their outstanding characteristics.

Under A.A.C. R18-11-112(C), any person may nominate a surface water for OAW status by submitting a nomination packet to the ADEQ Director. On November 22, 2023, the Sierra Club - Grand Canyon Chapter submitted the nomination for the upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek. The nomination packet included all required components: (1) a map and description of the river segment proposed for designation; (2) a written statement supporting the nomination with specific references to the OAW criteria in the rule; (3) evidence demonstrating that the nominated reaches meet those criteria; and (4) available water quality data establishing the river’s baseline water quality.

For the purpose of evaluating Arizona surface waters, ADEQ segments surface waters into reaches and assigns each segment a unique Waterbody Identification (WBID). The nominated WBIDs include 15060202-052, 15060202-038, 15060202-037, and 15060202-035 from the Granite Creek confluence to the Sycamore Creek confluence. The nominated WBID on Sycamore Creek includes 15060202-026 from the Cedar Creek confluence to the terminus at the Verde River. This nomination covers 35.93 miles of the upper Verde River and 11.71 miles of Sycamore Creek. The map below shows the nominated reaches and WBIDs:



ADEQ initiated a thorough review process upon receiving the nomination. The Department first verified that the nomination was complete and that the nominated reaches fell within the scope of waters eligible for OAW consideration. ADEQ’s evaluation of the nominated reaches eligibility for OAW designation was conducted pursuant to the criteria and procedures established in A.A.C. R18-11-112. Under R18-11-112(D), the Director may classify a surface water as an OAW only if specific criteria are met. In summary, those criteria require that the nominated surface water:

1. Be a perennial or intermittent water;
2. Be in a free-flowing condition;
3. Have “good water quality;” and
4. Meet at least one of the following special significance tests:
 - a. The surface water is of exceptional recreational or ecological significance due to unique attributes such as its geology, flora, fauna, water quality, aesthetic value, or wilderness character; or
 - b. The surface water supports an endangered or threatened species, where the existing high water quality is essential to that species’ survival, or the water provides critical habitat for a threatened/endangered species.

ADEQ’s technical review confirmed that the nominated reaches satisfy all the above criteria for OAW designation:

1. The segments of the Upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek nominated by the Sierra Club are perennial or intermittent reaches fed by spring discharge near the river’s headwaters. The nominated reaches are largely spring-fed and flow year-round, providing continuous aquatic habitat.

2. The nominated reaches are in a free-flowing state and there are currently no dams or major impoundments on the reaches, nor have the channel or banks in this area been subject to significant structural modifications. The surface water flows through natural, undeveloped canyons and valleys, thereby meeting the rule's definition of "free-flowing condition."
3. ADEQ's water quality assessment shows that the nominated reaches currently attain all applicable surface water quality standards. The surface waters are not identified as impaired or "not attaining" on Arizona's 2024 and 2026 CWA § 303(d) report, which lists impaired waters. On the contrary, available water quality data indicate that the nominated reaches' water quality is quantifiably "good." Parameters such as dissolved oxygen, pH, temperature, and nutrient levels meet standards for supporting aquatic life and recreational uses. In designating an OAW, ADEQ establishes the baseline water quality conditions to ensure that no degradation is allowed from those levels. The nominated reaches' good water quality must be maintained under the Tier 3 antidegradation protections that accompany OAW status.
4. ADEQ found that the nominated reaches possess ecological and recreational significance. The nominated reaches support multiple threatened or endangered species, thereby meeting the requirements of R18-11-112(D)(4). The nominated reaches support significant biodiversity, scenic beauty, and outdoor recreation opportunities. The water and its riparian corridor harbor diverse plant and animal life, representing a rare intact river ecosystem in an otherwise arid region. The upper Verde River provides critical habitat for at least six native fish species of great conservation concern, including several protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). Notably, the river is home to or designated critical habitat for the spokedace, loach minnow, and razorback sucker, all of which are federally listed endangered or threatened fish. The nominated reaches are also prime habitat for other native fishes such as the roundtail chub and two native sucker species, the desert sucker and the sonoran sucker, that are important to the river's ecology. In addition, the riparian environment in both nominated reaches supports threatened and endangered bird species like the southwestern willow flycatcher and the yellow-billed cuckoo, as well as the threatened northern mexican gartersnake, among others. The presence of these species and the requirement to maintain high water quality for their survival underscore the nominated reaches' eligibility under the "endangered or threatened species associated" criterion of the OAW rules.

Beyond its ecological attributes, the nominated reaches offer exceptional recreational values that are unique in Arizona. The surface water's clear, perennial flows and scenic canyon vistas provide opportunities for fishing, wildlife watching, hiking, kayaking, and backcountry camping. Sycamore Creek is commonly accessed for swimming in spring-fed pools by hiking Parsons Trail. Communities and outdoor enthusiasts in the region have long recognized the nominated reaches' value. To illustrate, stretches of the upper Verde River have been found eligible and suitable for federal Wild and Scenic River designation by the U.S. Forest Service due to their remarkable character and wilderness values. Approximately 37 miles of the upper Verde River were deemed eligible for Wild and Scenic status, a national-level recognition of the river's high quality.

Eligibility for Wild and Scenic River designation underscores that the nominated reaches' recreational, scenic, geological, and ecological features are significant, not just locally but nationally. Designating these surface water segments as OAWs is consistent with and complementary to these ongoing conservation efforts. It is also noteworthy that other tributaries of the Verde River have already been classified as OAWs, such as Oak Creek and Fossil Creek. Adding the nominated reaches to the OAW list will extend similar protections to a connected, high-value reach of the watershed.

In making the decision to proceed with rulemaking, ADEQ also complied with R18-11-112(F), which requires the Director to consider several additional factors beyond the basic eligibility criteria. These factors include:

1. Whether the surface water and its watershed can be managed to maintain and protect the existing water quality;
2. The social and economic impact of applying Tier 3 antidegradation protection;
3. The public comments received in support or opposition;
4. The timing of the nomination relative to the triennial review;
5. Consistency of the OAW designation with any applicable water quality management plans; and
6. Whether the surface water is located within any special protected area (such as a national or state park, wilderness area, etc.) or has another special designation.

ADEQ's analysis of the nominated reaches against these considerations favored the OAW designation:

1. The ability to manage and protect the nominated reaches' water quality is very feasible. Most of the lands along the nominated reaches are publicly owned and already managed for conservation purposes, including areas within the Prescott National Forest and state lands, and there are currently no major point-source dischargers in this reach. With OAW status, new or expanded point-source discharges to the nominated reaches would be prohibited unless they meet stringent exceptions, which is not expected to pose an economic burden because such discharges are not presently occurring and are unlikely in this largely rural, undeveloped area. Nonpoint source pollution controls will continue to be pursued through voluntary and collaborative means.
2. In terms of social and economic impacts, ADEQ has determined that Tier 3 protection for the nominated reaches will help safeguard drinking water supplies and sustain the recreational economy in the region, with minimal negative impact since few, if any, current industrial or municipal activities will be restricted.
3. Public and stakeholder comments received as part of this OAW nomination prior to rulemaking have largely been in favor of designation.
4. ADEQ recently completed a triennial review in 2023 and will review water quality standards again in 2026.
5. ADEQ reviewed water quality management plans in the area during the evaluation of the proposed OAW segments and concluded that the OAW segment is consistent with any existing plans.
6. The proposed OAW segments are not within any specially protected area such a national or state park and this potential OAW designation does not interfere with any potential Wild and Scenic River designation.

In summary, ADEQ has concluded that all the R18-11-112(F) factors either support or present no barrier to the OAW designation. The surface water's high quality can be protected, the benefits to Arizona's environment and citizens outweigh any minimal regulatory costs, stakeholder sentiment is strongly positive, and the action is timely and in harmony with other conservation designations.

ADEQ will continue to solicit public input throughout this rulemaking process. In accordance with A.A.C. R18-11-112(E), ADEQ held a community meeting on November 19, 2025, in the local area of the nominated reaches to present the nomination and gauge public opinion. This public meeting, along with additional outreach, provided an opportunity for local stakeholders to ask questions and voice their

support or concerns. Stakeholder input from these venues has been carefully considered in the development of this proposed rule. ADEQ is also opening an extended formal public comment period and scheduling a public hearing as part of this NPRM, thereby satisfying state law requirements for rulemaking public participation and ensuring alignment with the federal public hearing mandate.

B. Explanation of the Specific Rule Change

The specific change being proposed is an amendment to A.A.C. R18-11-112(G), which is the subsection that lists all surface waters in Arizona currently classified as OAWs. Paragraph (G) of the rule presently enumerates 22 OAW-designated stream segments across the state. This NPRM will add a new entry to this list for both the upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek. The new listings clearly delineate the upstream and downstream boundaries of the designated OAW segment of the nominated surface waters.

The exact boundaries in the rule correspond to the portion of the river evaluated by ADEQ and nominated by the Sierra Club. Based on the nomination packet and ADEQ's analysis, the Verde River OAW reach is approximately the upper 35.93 mile stretch in Yavapai County, beginning at the Granite Creek confluence and extending downstream to its confluence with Sycamore Creek. The stretch of Sycamore Creek covers 11.71 miles from its confluence with Cedar Creek to the terminus at the Verde River. For the final rule text, ADEQ will use survey coordinates or river mile markers to define this segment unambiguously, consistent with how other OAWs are described in the rule.

The Department invites public comments on this proposed amendment and will consider any feedback or suggested clarification regarding the description of the nominated reaches before finalizing the rule. If ADEQ proceeds with this rulemaking, the amended rule will be published as final, and the nominated reaches OAW designation will take effect. ADEQ will then transmit the updated water quality standards, including the new OAW listing, to the EPA for its review and approval pursuant to CWA § 303(c). This will ensure that the nominated reaches' OAW status is recognized at the federal level and that the river is afforded the full protection intended under the antidegradation policy.

7. A reference to any study relevant to the rule that the agency reviewed and proposes either to rely on or not to rely on in its evaluation of or justification for the rule, where the public may obtain or review each study, all data underlying each study, and any analysis of each study and other supporting material:

Relevant water quality data and ADEQ's internal evaluation report used in preparation for publishing this NPRM are available for public review at <https://azdeq.gov/active-rulemakings>.

8. A showing of good cause why the rulemaking is necessary to promote a statewide interest if the rulemaking will diminish a previous grant of authority of a political subdivision of this state:

Not applicable.

9. The preliminary summary of the economic, small business, and consumer impact:

ADEQ will expand our summary of the economic, small business, and consumer impact of this rulemaking in the Notice of Final Rulemaking (NFRM). This proposed rule would designate the Upper Verde River and portions of Sycamore Creek as OAWs under A.A.C.

R18-11-112(G). This action is limited in scope and does not impose new permitting fees, taxes, or direct costs on the general public, regulated entities, or small businesses. Instead, the designation strengthens the application of Arizona’s existing antidegradation policy by prohibiting activities that would cause degradation of the nominated reaches’ water quality. There are currently no regulated entities discharging to the nominated OAW reaches and ADEQ anticipates no significant increase in compliance costs because the designation primarily preserves existing high water quality conditions.

Small businesses, municipalities, and consumers may realize indirect benefits from this rule through protection of recreational, ecological, and aesthetic values that support local economies and property values. The rule may restrict future discharges or development proposals that could degrade the waterbody, but ADEQ expects such impacts to be minimal because few regulated discharges currently occur in the designated segment. Overall, the preliminary findings of ADEQ’s analysis show that the economic, small business, and consumer impact of the proposed rule will be neutral to positive, with any compliance costs outweighed by long-term public and environmental benefits associated with maintaining the high-quality waters of the Upper Verde River and Sycamore Creek.

10. The agency’s contact person who can answer questions about the economic, small business and consumer impact statement:

Name: Jonathan Quinsey
Title: Legal Specialist
Division: Water Quality
Address: 1110 W. Washington St, Phoenix, AZ 85007
Telephone: (602) 771-913
Email: quinsey.jonathan@azdeq.gov
Website: azdeq.gov

11. The time, place, and nature of the proceedings to make, amend, repeal, or renumber the rule, or if no proceeding is scheduled, where, when, and how persons may request an oral proceeding on the proposed rule:

Written comments about this proposed rulemaking will be accepted in person at the address provided under Item #5 and #10, Monday through Friday from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. except for state holidays. Comments will also be accepted via email at the email address provided under Item #5 and #10. Mailed written comments shall be postmarked within 60 days of this published notice. ADEQ is granting an extended comment period for this rulemaking, and the comment period for this rulemaking shall close on April 14, 2026.

An online oral proceeding is scheduled for this proposed rulemaking. A link to the hearing will be posted on the website for this rulemaking at <https://azdeq.gov/rulemaking/upper-verde-oaw>

Date: April 10, 2026
Time: 1:00 PM
Location: Online

12. All agencies shall list other matters prescribed by statute applicable to the specific agency or to any specific rule or class of rules. Additionally, an agency subject to Council review under A.R.S. §§ 41-1052 and 41-1055 shall respond to the following questions:

Not applicable.

- a. **Whether the rule requires a permit, whether a general permit is used and if not, the reasons why a general**

permit is not used:

This rulemaking modifies the list of surface waters subject to antidegradation protection but does not establish or revise permitting requirements.

b. Whether a federal law is applicable to the subject of the rule, whether the rule is more stringent than federal law and if so, citation to the statutory authority to exceed the requirements of federal law:

The designation of an OAW is expressly authorized by 40 C.F.R. § 131.12(a)(3), which permits states to identify high-quality waters for Tier 3 protection. The proposed amendment is consistent with 40 C.F.R. Part 131, including federal antidegradation requirements, and does not exceed federal standards.

c. Whether a person submitted an analysis to the agency that compares the rule's impact of the competitiveness of business in this state to the impact on business in other states:

No such analysis has been submitted.

13. A list of any incorporated by reference material as specified in A.R.S. § 41-1028 and its location in the rules:

Not Applicable.

14. The full text of the rules follows:

Rule text begins on the next page.

TITLE 18. ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

CHAPTER 11. DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY – WATER QUALITY STANDARDS

ARTICLE 1. WATER QUALITY STANDARDS FOR SURFACE WATERS

Section

R18-11-112. Outstanding Arizona Waters

ARTICLE 1. WATER QUALITY STANDARDS FOR SURFACE WATERS

R18-11-112. Outstanding Arizona Waters

- A. The Director shall classify a surface water as an outstanding Arizona water (OAW) by rule.
- B. The Director may adopt, under R18-11-115, a site-specific standard to maintain and protect existing water quality in an OAW.
- C. Any person may nominate a surface water for classification as an OAW by filing a nomination with the Director. The nomination shall include:
 - 1. A map and a description of the surface water;
 - 2. A written statement in support of the nomination, including specific reference to the applicable criteria for an OAW classification prescribed in subsection (D);
 - 3. Supporting evidence demonstrating that the criteria prescribed in subsection (D) are met; and
 - 4. Available water quality data relevant to establishing the baseline water quality of the proposed OAW.
- D. The Director may classify a surface water as an OAW based upon the following criteria:
 - 1. The surface water is a perennial or intermittent water;
 - 2. The surface water is in a free-flowing condition. For purposes of this subsection, “in a free-flowing condition” means that a surface water does not have an impoundment, diversion, channelization, rip-rapping or other bank armor, or another hydrological modification within the reach nominated for an OAW classification;
 - 3. The surface water has good water quality. For purposes of this subsection, “good water quality” means that the surface water has water quality that meets or is better than applicable surface water quality standards. A surface water that is listed as impaired under R18-11-604(E) is ineligible for OAW classification; and
 - 4. The surface water meets one or both of the following conditions:
 - a. The surface water is of exceptional recreational or ecological significance because of its unique attributes, such as the geology, flora and fauna, water quality, aesthetic value, or the wilderness characteristic of the surface water;
 - b. An endangered or threatened species is associated with the surface water and the existing water quality is essential to the species' maintenance and propagation or the surface water provides critical habitat for the threatened or endangered species. An endangered or threatened species is identified in “Endangered and Threatened Wildlife,” 50 CFR 17.11 (revised 2005), and “Endangered and Threatened Plants,” 50 CFR 17.12 (revised 2005). This material is incorporated by reference and does not include any later amendments or editions of the incorporated material. Copies of the incorporated material are available for inspection at the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality, 1110 West Washington Street, Phoenix, Arizona 85007 or may be obtained from the National Archives and Records Administration at <http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/cfr-table-search.html#page1>.
- E. The Director shall hold at least one public meeting in the local area of a surface water that is nominated for classification as an OAW to solicit public comment on the nomination.
- F. The Director shall consider the following factors when deciding whether to classify a surface water as an OAW:
 - 1. Whether there is the ability to manage the surface water and its watershed to maintain and protect existing water quality;
 - 2. The social and economic impact of Tier 3 antidegradation protection;

3. The public comments in support of, or in opposition to, an OAW classification;
4. The timing of the nomination relative to the triennial review of surface water quality standards;
5. The consistency of an OAW classification with applicable water quality management plans; and
6. Whether the nominated surface water is located within a national or state park, national monument, national recreation area, wilderness area, riparian conservation area, area of critical environmental concern, or it has another special use designation (for example, Wild and Scenic River).

G. The following surface waters are classified as OAWs:

1. The West Fork of the Little Colorado River, from its headwaters to Government Springs (approximately 9.1 river miles);
2. Oak Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with the Verde River (approximately 50.3 river miles);
3. West Fork of Oak Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with Oak Creek (approximately 15.8 river miles);
4. Peebles Canyon Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with the Santa Maria River (approximately 8.1 river miles);
5. Burro Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with Boulder Creek (approximately 29.5 miles);
6. Francis Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with Burro Creek (approximately 22.9 river miles);
7. Bonita Creek, from its boundary of the San Carlos Indian Reservation to its confluence with the Gila River (approximately 14.7 river miles);
8. Cienega Creek, from its confluence with Gardner Canyon to the USGS gaging station (#09484600) (approximately 28.3 river miles);
9. Aravaipa Creek, from its confluence with Stowe Gulch to the downstream boundary of the Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness Area (approximately 15.5 river miles);
10. Cave Creek, from its headwaters to the Coronado National Forest boundary (approximately 10.4 river miles);
11. South Fork of Cave Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with Cave Creek (approximately 8.6 river miles);
12. Buehman Canyon Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with unnamed tributary at 32°24'31"/110°32'08" (approximately 9.8 river miles);
13. Lee Valley Creek, from its headwaters to Lee Valley Reservoir (approximately 1.6 river miles);
14. Bear Wallow Creek, from its headwaters to the boundary of the San Carlos Indian Reservation (approximately 4.25 river miles);
15. North Fork of Bear Wallow Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with Bear Wallow Creek (approximately 3.8 river miles);
16. South Fork of Bear Wallow Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with Bear Wallow Creek (approximately 3.8 river miles);
17. Snake Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with the Black River (approximately 6.2 river miles);
18. Hay Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with the West Fork of the Black River (approximately 5.5 river miles);
19. Stinky Creek, from the White Mountain Apache Indian Reservation boundary to its confluence with the West Fork of the Black River (approximately 3.0 river miles);
20. KP Creek, from its headwaters to its confluence with the Blue River (approximately 12.7 river miles);
21. Davidson Canyon, from the unnamed spring at 31°59'00"/110°38'49" to its confluence with Cienega Creek; and
22. Fossil Creek, from its headwaters at the confluence of Sandrock and Calf Pen Canyons above Fossil Springs to its confluence with the Verde River (approximately 17.2 river miles).
23. Verde River, from its confluence with Granite Creek to its confluence with Sycamore Creek (approximately 35.9 river miles).
24. Sycamore Creek, from its confluence with Cedar Creek to its confluence with the Verde River (approximately 11.7 river miles).