Fremont Cottonwood demographics and regeneration along the Verde Wild and Scenic River

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# Abstract

Fremont cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii)* are a dominant riparian tree species in the Southwestern U.S. and are important habitat for native wildlife, highly dependent upon river hydrology. Fremont cottonwood are included as one of the Outstandingly Remarkable Values in the 1984 amendment to the 1964 Wild Scenic River Act for a reach of the Verde Wild and Scenic River. Fremont cottonwood health and demographics along the Verde River are understudied but important for managing environmental flow. This study uses seedling plots established after 2023 winter floods and dendrochronology to monitor regeneration and to quantify tree age and growth. Fremont cottonwoods along the Verde River are young, with the mean age being 24 years old. They continue to add biomass at a mature rate and their growth is significantly impacted by summer temperatures and river flows. Seedlings from the 2023 cohort continue to grow rapidly and their survival is governed by a diverse set of environmental conditions.

Keywords: Fremont Cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), Verde River, Wild and Scenic Rivers, dendrochronology, riparian

# Introduction and Background

**Introduction**

Riparian forests in Arizona are disproportionately important to the landscape despite their relatively small geographic area. Riparian forests in Arizona cover only about 0.4% of land surface area yet support more biodiversity and ecosystem functions than surrounding upland habitat (Ffolliott et al., 2004). In Arizona, 80 percent of all vertebrate species complete a part of their lifecycle in riparian areas (Hubbard, 1977). Riparian forests support and enhance terrestrial and aquatic habitat, filter upland sediment and nutrients, store water and recharge aquifers and stabilize stream banks among many other functions (Schultz et al., 2009).

The Verde River in central Arizona drains over 16 thousand square kilometers and is the longest, perennial river remaining in Arizona. Its watershed has elevations that range from over 3650 m ASL in the San Francisco Peaks to about 400 m ASL at its confluence with the Salt River. The headwaters in the upper Verde Valley originate from a series of springs draining the Big Chino and Little Chino aquifers (Wirt et al., 2005). The river then flows through the middle Verde Valley before it reaches its Wild and Scenic (W&S) designation just south of Camp Verde, AZ. Along this reach the Verde River gains volume from a string of canyons with perennial tributaries which get large portions of their base flow from springs discharging from the regional aquifers (Ecological Implications of Verde River Flows, 2008).

The Verde W&S River extends is isolated and generally inaccessible by road along this reach. After the W&S reach of the river, the Verde enters its lower reach and flows through two large storage reservoirs before joining the Salt River. This allows large winter and monsoon floods to flow through the river and continuously change the ecology and geomorphology of the river.

Although there are no large storage reservoirs above the Verde River Wild and Scenic corridor, the Verde River is still impacted by human use. Aquifers are pumped by municipal, irrigation, and domestic wells in the Little Chino Basin. Perennial flow of the Verde River begins about eight kilometers lower downstream than it did historically because of groundwater pumping (Ecological Implications of Verde River Flows , 2008). Surface water diversions between Clarkdale and Beasley River Access Point reduce base flow during the summer when water levels are historically at their lowest. In total, irrigation ditches withdraw about 34,000 acre feet with about half of that being consumed (Alam, 1997; Blasch et al., 2006). The Verde Valley also is an agricultural area with land being used for: pasture, pecans, grapes, corn, and vegetables. However, most farms are small both in size and revenue (USDA, 2012; Zhao et al., 2019).

The Verde River is one of two federally designated Wild and Scenic Rivers in Arizona. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act designated the Verde River for study in 1978 before being officially designated in 1984. To be designated, a river must possess “outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural or other similar values” (Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, 1968). Maintaining these values along the Verde are required because of this designation, Riparian forests along the Verde contribute to all the values listed in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Therefore, maintaining and regenerating Fremont cottonwoods (*Populus fremontii)* along the Verde is crucial to sustaining its remarkable values.

Fremont cottonwood *(Populus fremontii*) and Goodding’s willow (*Salix gooddingii*) are major components of riparian forests along the Verde River. Tree diversity is low in Verde River riparian forests with Fremont’s cottonwood being the dominant species. However, age class structure is usually very diverse. Stands of Fremont cottonwood and Goodding’s willow often occur in spatially separate, but same age cohorts with younger stands closer to the active channel and older stands extending up to 200 meters away (Stromberg, 1993).

The reproductive ecology of cottonwood and willow influences how and when they regenerate. These trees are pioneer species, meaning they rely on disturbance and large amounts of seeds to establish. Both species produce large amounts (up to 25 million on mature trees) of seeds each spring. The seeds are small and have “tufts'' that are designed for long distance wind and water dispersal. Seeds are released in early spring as winter floods recede (Stromberg, 1993). This allows the seeds to be deposited on bare, moist mineral soil created by high winter flows. Regeneration of Fremont cottonwood and Gooding willow are not consistent in Arizona. A study in Southern Arizona showed that regeneration occurred only about every decade and was dependent on strong winter floods to scour vegetation and deposit fine alluvial soils (Cooper et al. 1999; Stromberg, 1997).

The winter of 2023 was the one of the largest in Arizona in the past 30 years. On March 1st, 2023, the Verde River basin was at 318% of its normal snowpack (NRCS). As a result, during spring snowmelt the Verde River flows reached between a ten percent and a four percent annual exceedance probability (<https://streamstats.usgs.gov/ss/?gage=09506000&tab=info>). This large flood caused significant flooding, toppled trees and in some cases, reshaped the active channel. This flood disturbance created conditions for Fremont cottonwoods to regenerate via seed and unique opportunity to study their regeneration and survivorship.

The Verde River’s unique and intact hydrology makes it rare in the southwest. This study used the following research questions to understand regeneration and survival of cottonwood on this river.

1. How have seedlings from the 2023 spring cohort survived and grown in the past two growing seasons?
2. How old are Fremont cottonwoods along the Verde River?
3. What variables impact annual growth for Fremont cottonwoods along the Verde River?

## Methods

### Study Site

Access to the Verde River Wild and Scenic Corridor is restricted to a few road access points or from rafting along the river. Because of the limited access, sites were chosen that are logistically feasible and realistic to access on a frequent and continuing basis. Seedling plots were established, and tree cores were taken at Beasley Flat River Access Point (BRAP), downstream of Camp Verde and Childs dispersed camping area, upstream from the confluence of the Verde River with Fossil Creek (Figure 1). A third site at Sheep Bridge River Access Point was used to collect tree cores but was not used to study seedling mortality monitoring because it is too remote to access regularly. All three sites have healthy Fremont cottonwood-Goodding’s willow riparian, gallery forests and have a largely intact hydrology.

A map of a river

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Figure ?? Map of study sites

### Seedling Plots

Ten monitoring plots were established at two W&S sites. River reaches were walked in Fall 2023 to identify seedlings that had survived most of their first growing season. A metal pin was pounded into the ground and determined a radius to encompass all or most of the seedlings. We measured seedling heights with a ruler or measuring tape to the nearest centimeter and the diameters near the ground were measured with calipers to the nearest millimeter within the determined radius.

If a regeneration area was too large or there were too many seedlings to feasibly measure, the area was subsampled. First the area containing the cottonwood seedling was mapped using the Arrow100 GNSS (Quebec, Canada). After the polygon was created and the area determined to the nearest square meter, a one square meter hoop was used to create subsample areas and seedlings within the hoop were then measured and recorded. 15-30% of the total area containing seedlings was sampled.

**Light**

Light intensity was measured with a Li-COR LI-1500 Light Sensor Logger (Lincoln, NE). The pyranometer sensor was placed in the or near the plot and allowed to acclimate. Then, a reading was taken every minute for 5 minutes. These readings were then averaged to get an average W m-2 value at each plot at an accuracy of ± .3%.

**Herbaceous**

Herbaceous competition was estimated using the Braun-Blanquet 6 step scale (Braun-Blanquet, 1964). Plants within the plots and rooted at the same elevation as the cottonwood seedlings were considered.

**Soil**

Soil samples were collected inside the seedling plots using a trowel. Soil samples are from the first few inches of the soil horizon where the cottonwoods originally germinated. Samples were dried in an oven for 6 hours at 70 degrees Celsius. The samples were placed in a shaker and sieved for 15 minutes and the percent fines (0.075mm or smaller) was calculated for each site. Grain size distributions were based on weight percentage.

**Analysis Methods**

R were used to calculate summary statistics (R version 4.4.2). Height and diameter values were converted into a single Height-Diameter ratio (HDR). This was done so that each seedling had a single value describing its size. A higher HDR means that a seedling is becoming thinner and taller.

Equation 1.

Changes in density and seedling size were determined by subtracting the June 2024 values from the November 2023 values. To measure between significant changes between visit (Fall 2023, Spring 2024 and Fall 2024) and growth (mean height, diameter and HDR) an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to test for significant changes. Tukey’s HSD test was used to test for significant changes between variables. A critical P-value of less than or equal to 0.05 was used to test for significance.

A logistic regression model was used to see how the three measured variables impacted seedling survivorship. The three site variables were compared to Fall 2024 survivorship. A stepwise selection model was run to determine which variables, and which combinations were significant.

### Dendrochronology

To determine the age and growth of Fremont cottonwood trees, cores were collected in October 2023 at all three study sites. A variety of size classes of live Fremont cottonwoods across the floodplain were selected for coring. A core was taken as low on the tree trunk as possible, at an angle perpendicular to the tree’s lean and aimed to be as close to the pith as possible. The borer was then drilled into the tree far enough to ensure that the pith had been passed.

Cores were prepared and sanded using standard methods according to Stokes and Smiley (1968). The cores were placed under a dissecting microscope and rings were counted. For cores without a pith, a concentric circle ruler was used to estimate position and determine the number of the few missing rings. Ages of the innermost ring as well as the estimated pith date were recorded. For cores where a pith date could not be estimated, a minimum age was recorded.

To measure the ring widths of each core, the cores were scanned. Dated cores were placed on an electronic scanner and uploaded into Cybis CooRecorder software (<https://www.cybis.se/forfun/dendro/index.htm>). Each ring was marked in the software so that the date could be verified and ring widths measured.

**Crossdating**

Dated and scanned cores are saved as a .RWL file and uploaded into Cdendro (<https://www.cybis.se/forfun/dendro/index.htm>). Files were separated into 4 different sites: Upper Beasley, Lower Beasley, Childs and Sheep. All the cores (n=133) were analyzed with COFECHA and cores with a correlation coefficient of +0.30 were separated. This separated series (n=39) was then ran through COFECHA to check for any dating issues. The dplR package created by Dr. Andy Bunn was used (Bunn, 2010) to create Ring Width Indices (RWI) and Basal Area Increment (BAI) for the crossdated series to then be compared to climate variables.

Correlation to climate

Four climate variables were used to run a response function analysis and a correlation analysis on the chronologies. Mean monthly values for: average temperature, precipitation, and Palmer Drought Severity Index (PDSI) were downloaded from the NOAA climate monitoring website (<https://www.ncei.noaa.gov/access/monitoring/climate-at-a-glance/county/time-series/AZ-025/tmin/1/0/1993-2023?base_prd=true&begbaseyear=1901&endbaseyear=2000>) from 1993 to 2023 for Yavapai County, Arizona. Mean monthly stream flow was gathered from the Verde River near Camp Verde (09506000) USGS gauge from 1988-2023. This gage was selected as it is located near the Wild and Scenic portion of the river and had the longest continuous discharge record (1988 to current).

Response Function Analysis

Response function analysis is used to help determine relationships between climate variables and tree growth. These analyses differ from simple correlations in that they address the autocorrelation that is usually prevalent in both climate and tree growth data. Response functions and their results are more robust than correlations. Using the Treeclim package in R (Zang & Biondi, 2015) I tested my chronologies to the 4 climate variables. A critical P-value of less than or equal to 0.05 was used to determine if a trend was significant and an exact bootstrap method was used. An exact bootstrapping method was used because of the small dataset and because it gives an exact distribution as it only uses data within the dataset. A response function analysis was used for water year (September-October) was used to test against the annual growth for that year.

## Results

Seedling Survivorship

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Figure ??. Mean densities across BRAP plots.

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Figure ??. Childs mean density plots.

At BRAP, four plots had increases in density between all three visits. One plot stayed constant across visits and the remaining (number) plots decreased between each visit.

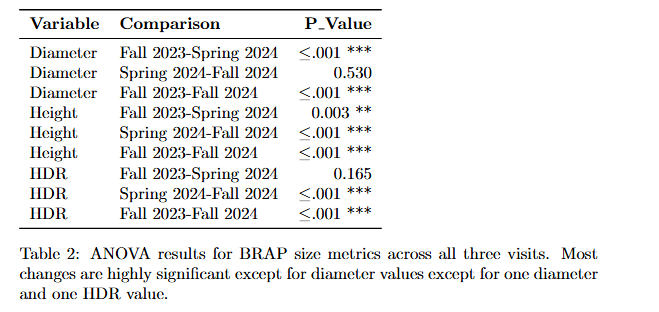
At Childs only one plot had a higher density than when it was first surveyed. The remaining (number) plots decreased in density. However, densities were higher at Childs that at BRAP.

**Seedling sizes**

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**Logistic regression model**

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Light, herbaceous competition, and fine sediment were highly significant for seedling survival at BRAP. Because all three variables were originally significant, the stepwise model did not have to remove any insignificant variables and see if this made other variables significant.

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The Childs model run had light and fines sediment as significant variables in seedling survivorship but not herbaceous competition. Once the stepwise model was run and the herbaceous variable removed, the p-value for fines decreased slightly more.

**Age at Coring Height**

Age at coring height plots

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Figure ??. Age at coring height. The bar graph is the number of trees dating back to each year while the line graph is the cumulative count of all cores over time.

Age at coring height distribution is not normal (Shapiro-Wilk test of <.05) (Figure x). The mean age at coring height was 24 years old. In total, 133 cores were able to be dated. The most recent core was from 2016.

**Annual Growth**

The final crossdated series (n=39) produced an interseries correlation of +0.395 and a mean sensitivity of 0.533. This was the series used to determine growth and ring widths as well as to test against my climate variables. R (Figure x). Basal area increment did what, describe your results and plot (Figure x). Basal Area Index (BAI) is generally increasing from 1995 to 2010 before stabilizing until 2023 (Figure x). Meanwhile, Ring Width Index (RWI) has been generally decreasing since about 2000 until 2023 (Figure x). Both BAI and RWI saw large increases in the year 2023.

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Figure ?? Ring Width Index (RWI) by year for the crossdated series.

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Figure ??. Basal area increment (BAI) by year for the cross-dated chronology.

Response function analysis table

Five variables were found to be significant in determining annual tree growth. Three of these were streamflows of certain months while the other two were variables related to climate. Four out of the five significant variables were positive. In addition, all of the significant variable months were between June and October.

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Table??. Significant climate variables for the crossdated series. Relationships were significant at p≤ .05. Because an exact bootstrapping method was used, no p-values are produced. Whether or not the trend is significant is stated.

## Discussion Seedling survivorship and demographics

Densities decreased or stayed constant in 80% of plots surveyed across the two sites. The remaining 20% of plots increased, possibly indicating that there was recruitment following the seed release in Spring of 2024 that survived into Fall 2024.

Seedling size was used a proxy for seedling health and potential. Both sites had all three-size metrics increase between the beginning and end of the study. Seedlings grew larger at Childs during the study time. Densities at Childs also decreased at a higher rate than those at BRAP. It is possible that quicker growing plots decrease themselves in density quicker as well. Both sites had their HDR values increase. This means that seedlings are becoming taller and thinner as they grow over their first two years.

Causes of mortality were difficult to determine. No significant floods scoured away seedlings during the study. At some sites, the seedlings were showing signs of desiccation during the spring 2024 visits, while sites LB 3 and LB 4 had encroachment of Common Cocklebur (*Xanthium strumarium*). The Common Cocklebur seemed to be most highly concentrated in the sandy center of the depressions while Fremont cottonwood seedlings ring the outside of the depression. Fremont cottonwoods within the center were taller as they were forced to grow quickly to compete with the cocklebur. Browsing was infrequently observed and at no plots did browsing seem to be a significant impact.

In two growing seasons, seedling heights reached an average of 36 cm and 64 cm at BRAP and Childs respectively. These heights are about half of what Fremont cottonwood seedlings were found to have grown in a similar study in Central Arizona (Stromberg, 1997). The smaller sizes found on the Verde River could also be because all cottonwoods regardless of size or cohort were incorporated. For example, large numbers of seedlings from 2024 floods were measured in both the Spring 2024 and Fall 2024 visits.

### Variables impacting survivorship

**Light**

Riparian cottonwoods are generally considered to be shade intolerant species. Light is often considered a secondary variable to water available (Cooper et al., 1999). Light was found to be highly significant (p-value ≤ .001) for both sites.

**Herbaceous**

Herbaceous competition was found to be a highly significant variable at BRAP. However, it was found to be not significant in predicting seedling survival at Childs. At BRAP herbaceous competition was positively related to seedling survival. This contradicts the idea that seedling competition with other species would be expected to decrease survival. One explanation for this is that sites that had favorable conditions for cottonwood seedlings (adequate water and light) were also suitable for competitors. However, because this was still a positive, significant relationship, cottonwood seedlings could be able to outcompete their competitors.

**Soil**

Soil is often cited as one of the most important factor in determining cottonwood seedling survival (Bhattacharjee et al., 2008; Cooper et al., 1999). Soil trenches are often used when determining soil characteristics for cottonwood survival in floodplain settings (Cooper et al., 1999; Varani et al., 2024). However, because this method was not used in this study it is difficult to make wide reaching assumptions about soil texture and seedling survival on the Verde River. Soil samples were taken from the first few inches of soil where seedlings initially germinated, so this variable only addresses the soil in which cottonwood seedlings germinated. Percent fines were found to be a significant variable at both sites. However, the relationship seems to be more complicated, because sites had very different amounts of fines in their soils. The average percent fines at BRAP were about 16.5% while the average at Childs was 6.3%. There was a negative relationship for percent fines at BRAP indicating that as fines increase, survivorship decreases. It is likely that sites with high percentages of fines (>50%) are in more isolated depositional sites that are further removed from the river and therefore not as frequently replenished by groundwater. Childs had a more traditional relationship in that as fines increased, so did survival. This is more consistent with existing literature that an increase in fines increases water holding potential.

### Dendrochronology

**Minimum ages**

Most of the cottonwoods along the Verde River are young. The mean age at coring height is the year 2000.4. Previous research on riparian forests found that cottonwood-willow forests in the Verde Valley have spent the most of the 1900s recovering. Cottonwood-Willow forests covered only 270 acres of the Verde Valley in 1940. This then peaked in 1977 with 551 acres before stabilizing following large floods in 1983 and 1993 (Sharon Masek Lopez & Abraham E. Springer, 2002). This could help explain why there are few cottonwoods dating back to this time. It is possible that Cotton-Willow forests were limited from heavy human influences such as: agriculture, land clearing and a copper smelter before being allowed to recover by the 1970s. Then, large floods in 1983, 1993, 2005 and 2023 have kept riparian forests young and refreshed.

Tree root collars are submerged under sediment leading to uncertainty about their exact age. Based on the understanding of Fremont cottonwood ecology and the gauge record, it is likely that most of the cottonwoods cored germinated in winter floods in 1993 or 1995. Stromberg 1997, observed and measured Fremont cottonwood seedling establishment after both years.

There is also a very weak correlation (r2 = 0.06) between the age and diameter of cottonwoods cored. With no strong trend between age and diameter, it means that other factors may be influencing size. For example, competition between trees for sunlight may be suppressing smaller trees. Cottonwoods are shade intolerant species and because they tend to regenerate in short, distinct timeframes suppressed trees may be much smaller than dominant trees of the same age.

**Tree growth**

(R. Willms et al., 2006) describes cottonwoods in Canada as following a general growth pattern, reaching their peak growth at about 20 years after their germination before entering the mature stage of their growth. Cottonwoods along the Verde River seem to follow this trend. Basal area increased slowly during the establishment phase (for about 10 years). This was then followed by another decade of rapid growth before leveling off and entering the mature growth stage. A key difference between the Canadian study and this study being the large increase in BAI following 2023 winter floods. This drives up the 5-year average curve. In addition, the units described by R. Willms et alt. are in 1-9 cm2 while the cottonwoods along the Verde are within the 10-30 cm2 range. So, while Verde Cottonwoods growth follows a similar trend, they grow much more rapidly.

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Although cottonwoods are pioneer species, they are still relatively young at 25-30 years old. Fremont cottonwoods are shorter lived species compared to other North American cottonwoods. It is generally accepted that few Fremont cottonwoods live to be over 150 years where Plains and narrowleaf cottonwoods have been documented over 200 and 300 years, generally in colder climates (Rood & Polzin, 2003). However, Verde River cottonwoods growth may already be at a mature stage based on their growth.

**Response to climate**

Different cottonwood species in different geographic areas respond differently to seasonal streamflows. For example, plains cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides)* in the Northern Rockies had growth most correlated to March to June or April to July streamflows (Schook et al., 2016). This is reflective of a snowmelt driven system. Rio Grande cottonwoods (*Populus deltoides spp. wislizeni*) along a regulated reach of the Rio Grande in New Mexico were most correlated to July-September streamflow which indicates a monsoon driven system (Varani et al., 2024). The Verde River is unique because it is a snowmelt driven system in the Southwest that also is relatively unregulated. It is an interesting blend of aspects of both the Northern Rockies reach as well as the regulated reach of the Rio Grande.

June and July streamflows had the highest correlation to tree growth. In the Verde River, June streamflows are typically the lowest of the year. Although the monsoon season officially begins June 15th, meaningful precipitation usually arrives in mid-July. Therefore, June and July before the arrival of the North American Monsoon often have the lowest flows and highest temperatures. In addition, June and July is peak irrigation season for agriculture within the Verde Valley (Garner & Bills, 2012).

Groundwater and surface water are highly related in the Southwest . Higher flows, and therefore higher groundwater levels, could also saturate more of the rhizosphere allowing for more roots to be able to access water. This water could then contribute to tree growth or cooling.

Recent research found that Fremont cottonwoods can cool themselves remarkably well from high summer temperatures as long as they have adequate water (Moran et al., 2023). Higher flows could increase water availability and allow them to cool themselves better. In this case, summer precipitation and the monsoon season drives tree growth.

October temperatures (positive) and September streamflows (negative) were also significantly correlated to annual growth. Higher October temperatures may help prolong the growing season for riparian trees which would allow them to increase their growth. Higher June and July flows could help alleviate high summer temperatures and recharge the alluvial aquifer that these trees draw water from.

June PDSI positively impacts tree growth which is consistent with a low flow driven growth. These are also relatively weak correlations even though they are significant. June PDSI could positively impact tree growth because if temperatures are higher in June and trees have adequate water, they may be able to grow quicker.

Limitations/Assumptions

The series and cores collected are short in nature. This makes it difficult to produce high correlations for crossdating. I used COFECHA to select cores that were correlated to each other and the overall collection of tree cores to use for further analysis. Because Fremont cottonwoods grow in riparian areas with access to year around water, it is unlikely that rings are missing which means that the trees are likely dated correctly even though this may be difficult to statistically prove.

**Challenges**

The study sites along the Verde River are upstream from large storage reservoirs. This allows them to have relatively intact environmental flows. A challenge associated with the natural flows is that many areas of the river are depositional. This means that the root collar of the tree is buried and the depth it is buried is also unknown. This means that their exact age cannot be determined therefore all we can determine is their “age at coring height”.

Another challenge with this project is that most trees are young. This makes it more difficult to crossdate series as well as could make reaching a critical P-value of .05 more difficult for statistical tests.

**Conclusions and Implications**

Fremont cottonwoods that established after the 2023 winter floods continue to grow and reduce in density. Seedling plots seem to be impacted by different variables depending on their location. The wide variety of significant variables impacting seedling survival shows that a combination of factors is important in maintaining seedlings. Most Fremont cottonwoods on the Verde are relatively young and date about to the year 2000. They continue to grow and add basal area at an increasing rate, suggesting that the forest has yet to reach a mature state. Fremont cottonwood growth appears to be driven by summer streamflow. This also is when streamflows are the lowest and temperatures are the highest. As base flows continue to decline, their growth and resilience could be at risk. Maintaining higher flows during the summer irrigation season would positively benefit riparian forests. Keeping the natural systems and environmental flows along the Verde River is crucial to maintaining and protecting its riparian forests.

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