

Rio Grande Citizens Forum
El Paso, Texas
July 23, 2015
*** Tentative Meeting Notes**

Board Members in attendance:

Conrad Keyes, Jr., Paso del Norte Watershed Council
Daniel Chavez, Huidobro County Irrigation District #1
Gill Sorg, City of Las Cruces, Council
John Balliew, El Paso Water Utilities
John Cornell, New Mexico Wildlife Federation
Austin Marshall, University of Texas at El Paso
Sal Masoud, Del Rio Engineering, Inc.
Travis Johnson, Travis Johnson Law Firm
Zack Libbin, Elephant Butte Irrigation District

International Boundary and Water Commission – US Section Staff in attendance:

Antonio Solo, Area Operations Manager – American Dam
Carlos Peña, Co-Chair IBWC, Principal Engineer – Operations
Jose Nuñez, Principal Engineer - Engineering
Sally Spener, Foreign Affairs Secretary
Shellie Muñoz, Public Affairs Assistant
Zack Schlachter, Environmental Protection Assistant

International Boundary and Water Commission – Mexican Section Staff in attendance:

Enrique Muñoz, IBWC – Mexican Section
Manuel Morales, IBWC – Mexican Section

ATTENDEES:

Angel Bustamante, El Paso Water Utilities
Annabelle Johnson, Citizen
Carlos Acevedo, Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC)
Chuck Taylor, Trustee #5 El Paso Independent School District
Diego Murcia, El Diario
Dwayne Solana, City of Sunland Park
Earl F. Burkholder, Global Cogo
Gonzalo Cedillos, El Paso Water Utilities
Grisel Grizde, El Paso Water Utilities
Harrison Rankin, Student
Hermalinda Vazquez, City of Sunland Park
Jessica Christianson, El Paso Electric
Joe Baca, Arcadis
Jose Fernandez, Citizen
Judith Chicka, Citizen
Judy Ackerman, Citizen
Karina Rivera, Office of Congressman Hurd
Lamar Skardo, UUIA
Michael Landis, United States Bureau of Reclamation
Luis Gibson, Citizen
Mike Gaglio, High Desert Native Plants
Philip Partridge, Thunderbird Digital

R. Kimpel, Citizen
Roberto Diaz de Leon, Sunland Park
Sam Irrinki, AECOM
Sarah Howard, National Park Service
William Hoover, Texas Master Naturalists
Woody Irving, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Welcoming Remarks:

At 6:30 PM Citizens Forum Co-Chair Carlos Peña convened the meeting. He welcomed the group, and had the board members and members of the audience introduce themselves.

Mr. Peña then read the area drought conditions announcement that was handed to all present and turned the meeting over to the first presenter, Mr. Andres Garcia.

Presentation One – Water Quality in the Upper Rio Grande: Annual Water Quality Update and Basin Advisory Meeting - Andres Garcia and Leslie Grijalva, International Boundary and Water Commission Texas Clean Rivers Program

Mr. Garcia provided a history of operations of the Texas Clean Rivers Program (CRP) and how it uses the watershed management approach to monitor the Rio Grande and Pecos Rivers. He explained that their primary activities consist of Water Monitoring, Water Quality Assessment, Publications, Outreach, Environmental Education and Public Participation. Mr. Garcia provided a list of partners that assist with the collection and analysis of water samples which conduct sampling using the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) sampling procedures and accredited laboratory analysis. Local partners include: USIBWC Field Offices in El Paso and Presidio, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso Community College, El Paso Water Utilities, TCEQ El Paso Field Office, Big Bend National Park, Big Bend Ranch State Park and the TCEQ Continuous Water Quality Monitoring Program. In addition, Mr. Garcia presented slides indicating the location of monitoring sites. He then turned the meeting over to Ms. Leslie Grijalva.

Ms. Grijalva presented on the main Rio Grande Water Quality Issues listed as: bacteria, nutrients, salts, depressed dissolved oxygen (DO), fish kills, illegal discharging, trash and exotic species. She provided photographs illustrating examples of some of the issues such as invasive species which choke the river, Presidio fish kills due to low flows and temperatures, and foam in the Del Rio area likely due to high phosphates.

Ms. Grijalva presented on the 2014 Assessment (Integrated Report) which is required by the Clean Water Act to assess the health of the river basins. She explained that water bodies not meeting the state water quality standards are placed in the impaired waters list called the “303d List.” She also explained the difference between “Impairments” and “Concerns” where Impairments mean the quality of the water is not meeting standards and Concerns mean the quality of the water is near non-attainment of standards or there are issues with parameters where standards don’t exist. She provided a slide listing the impaired segments of the rivers which listed six segments, two of which are new to the list. She also informed those present that there are plans to split Big Bend National Park monitoring activities into two areas.

Additionally, a slide with a graph was presented illustrating the Courchesne Bridge in the area from Paisano to McNutt in the El Paso-Sunland Park area. She explained that the E coli bacteria levels were well above the standard for bacteria and there was a serious problem in this area.

Concerns for the El Paso Reach of the Rio Grande include increasing levels of bacteria in the El Paso area (specifically around Sunland Park, NM/El Paso, TX.) Station 17040 has shown bacteria levels up to 24,000 colony forming units (cfu). The Clean Rivers Program has alerted the New Mexico Environment

Department and TCEQ Region 6 of the problem and they are working together to find a solution to the problem.

In reference to the Mercury Study, Ms. Grijalva reported that the Clean Rivers Program was collecting samples at 14 sites in the Upper Rio Grande stretch that were sent for analysis to the Clean Rivers Program contract laboratory of which there weren't any results that were of concern because the mercury levels were within the normal range. She stated that effective September 1, 2015, the Clean Rivers Program will stop conducting mercury sampling at all stations. However, sampling will continue in the Presidio and Big Bend parks due to ongoing mining activities.

Ms. Grijalva reported that the EPA has mandated that states create Nutrient Criteria and that TCEQ has been tasked with establishing the criteria. She informed that standards had been established in 2013 for Chlorophyll for 75 reservoirs and that standards are still in development for rivers and streams. She indicated that these criteria will impact the wastewater treatment plant effluent limits and agriculture since the USDA 2010 report estimates that 65% of farmers are not optimizing nutrient management.

Next, Ms. Grijalva went on to provide information on the International Boundary and Water Commission's Adopt-a-River Program in which community groups adopt a 2-mile section of the river for 2 years. They commit to 2-3 cleanups per year, in which the IBWC provides trash bags and gloves along with a sign acknowledging the volunteer group. She stated that New Mexico still has some sections available for adoption.

It was also made known that the Clean Rivers Program has partnered with the El Paso Community College in working together with the Service Learning and RISE Programs. The Service Learning program consists of integrating community service or special projects into the professor's curriculum and students help with analyzing data, making graphs, entering data, helping with river clean ups and water sampling. The RISE Program provides underrepresented students research opportunities to encourage them to pursue graduate degrees and biomedical research. The Clean Rivers Program constantly seeks ways for students to learn about the environmental science field to help them gain exposure to the field and sampling techniques.

The Paso del Norte Watershed Council is another CRP outreach program. The council addresses watershed issues from the Elephant Butte Dam to Presidio areas. The CRP received a grant for a watershed plan (319) which will consist of intensive bacteria monitoring, and bacteria source-tracking, and holding stakeholder meetings to discuss current projects. Points of contact for the Paso del Norte Watershed Council are Conrad Keyes at cgkeyesjr@q.com or Hilary Bringar at hbringar@marronic.com.

Ms. Grijalva concluded her presentation by presenting a slide of the Clean Rivers Program website at www.ibwc.gov/CRP/Index.htm and let the audience know that publications are posted there and are downloadable and open to the public.

She then opened the meeting to questions from the board and public.

Question – Is the river fishable or swimmable?

Answer – The Anthony, Vinton, and Canutillo area is fine to swim in. However, not from Sunland Park, NM downstream.

Question/Comment – The Sunland Park wastewater treatment plant is an obvious source of pollution.

Answer – A complaint has been filed with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality. The data has been provided to them and the New Mexico Environment Department.

Question/Concern – Bacteria levels and mercury levels tend to be high by the Courchesne Bridge where a Crossfit park is located but no one goes there. What amount of money is going toward improving public relations to let the public know if it is safe to go into the river?

Answer – IBWC provides press releases as needed but does not focus on recreation in its mission. There are other entities, such as the county, which has a river park, that are promoting recreation along the river.

Community member's response – The City of Sunland Park, NM has received a \$13,000 grant to beautify the river trail.

Question/Concern – Concern about river pollution affecting the population. What enforcement priorities do we have?

Answer from Carlos Peña – We're not a regulatory/enforcement agency. We provide information to regulatory agencies such as TCEQ.

Comment from Mr. John Balliew, El Paso Water Utilities – The Rio Grande isn't very clean, but we have had a bacteria problem for the past 10-15 years. It is much better than 10 – 15 years ago.

Citizen's Statement – After Santa Teresa's treatment plant failed, their sewage was sent to Sunland Park's plant, causing problems with Sunland Park's stretch of the river.

There were no additional questions from the board or the audience.

With the questions answered, Ms. Grijalva's presentation was completed and the meeting was turned over to Mr. Derrick O'Hara, United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission.

Presentation Two – Status of Rio Grande Flood Control Levee Certification, Design, and Construction Along the Upper Rio Grande, Mr. Derrick O'Hara, International Boundary and Water Commission

Mr. O'Hara provided information on the Rio Grande Canalization Project stating that it stretches from Percha Dam, NM to American Dam in El Paso, TX over 105.4 miles. He also informed that the Rectification Reach stretches 93.6 miles from American Dam downstream to Little Box Canyon. Mr. O'Hara informed that a FEMA accredited levee system must meet requirement of Title 44, Chapter 1, Section 65.10 of the Federal Regulations (44 CFR 65.10) 'Mapping of Areas Protected by Levee Systems.' Additionally, such levee systems are shown on the Federal Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) as providing protection from 100-year floods.

Mr. O'Hara's presentation provided background about the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission's (USIBWC) rehabilitation of several sections of the Rio Grande Canalization Project and Rectification Project levees as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. He let those present know that the USIBWC has completed several packages of submittals to FEMA representing rehabilitated levee segments for accreditation.

A list of five USIBWC Submittals for FEMA Levee Accreditation that have been completed was provided and those present were informed that a draft of the FEMA review comments were received for a few of the submittals and are being addressed by the USIBWC. The audience was informed that the next steps for FEMA Levee Accreditation consist of providing responses to FEMA's comments, continuing coordination meetings with FEMA, El Paso County, and Doña Ana County, and to continue improvements throughout the levee system. Local communities are responsible for addressing interior drainage issues on the landside of the river levee to meet FEMA requirements.

To conclude this portion of his presentation, Wasteway construction projects related to flood control at the Yselta and Fabens reach were discussed and maps and photographs of the wasteways were presented and the meeting was opened for questions.

Question – What year model was used for FEMA? Does it take into consideration sediment and vegetation?

Answer – We take the baseline and run models taking into consideration sediment and vegetation. Updates are available on the website.

Question – Any responses from FEMA?

Answer – Yes. We're working on responses to their comments.

Question – In reference to interior drainage reports by a city/community, if they are lagging, then we have to wait on the communities' responses to interior drainage studies?

Answer – All along the river, communities are encountering problems getting funding to submit required studies/material to FEMA.

With the questions for this presentation answered, Mr. O'Hara moved onto his next presentation.

Presentation Three – Structures for Irrigation and Flood Control at the Confluence of the American Canal and College Arroyo, Mr. Derrick O'Hara, International Boundary and Water Commission

Mr. O'Hara provided aerial photos of the American Canal at College Arroyo Confluence and informed that it consisted of a three-culvert system and that the concrete lining of the American Canal, which conveys water for U.S. users, had been damaged in September of 2014, following a storm that affected the adjacent U.S. Customs and Border Protection border fence at the College Arroyo. He informed that a letter was issued to the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) for them to conduct and complete repairs to eight flood-damaged panels in the canal by March 1, 2015 in order to avoid further damage from irrigation flows, with the remainder of the repairs to be completed in the September time frame after the irrigation season. He informed that for the construction at College Arroyo a low flow of 25 cubic feet per second (cfs) was diverted until March 1, 2015, the culvert and overchute structure were completed and the initial construction completed before irrigation season began on June 1st. The overchute structure conveys flow from the College Arroyo over the American Canal and into the Rio Grande.

A diagram of the American Canal Design Overchute and Culvert was provided. Mr. O'Hara informed on the work that has been completed and the items that are being coordinated with CBP such as on-site machinery to remove debris, re-bar removal, and a Memorandum of Understanding between Customs and Border Protection, El Paso County Water Improvement District #1, and the United States International Boundary and Water Commission in reference to gate operation.

Finally, various before and after photos were presented.

With that Mr. O'Hara concluded his presentation and the meeting was opened for questions and public comment.

Public Comment:

Question/Comment – What is the status on Country Club Road where the floodgate on the bridge is causing noise? There is now a piece of metal sticking out that appears to be hazardous because it sticks out of the road and is rattling on the road surface.

Answer – USIBWC is considering various options to address flood control and the floodgate noise at this location. We are looking into lowering the level of the riverbed as an alternative to the floodgate. In reference to the piece of metal, USIBWC will look into it tomorrow morning.

There was no further public comment and the meeting was opened for suggested topics for the following Citizens Forum.

Suggested Topics:

- Levee Rectification
- Effect of vegetation removal and hydraulic calculations
- Status update on riparian/restoration project
- Sediment transport study update
- Update from the City of Sunland Park on the wastewater project, the grant they received to beautify the river

With the presentations concluded, questions and feedback addressed, meeting open for public comment and suggestions on topics for the following Citizens Forum completed, the meeting was closed at approximately 7:45 PM.

Next meeting will be on October 22, 2015 in Las Cruces, NM.

*Meeting notes are tentative and summarize in draft the contents and discussion of Citizens Forum Meetings. While these notes are intended to provide a general overview of Citizens Forum Meetings, they may not necessarily be accurate or complete, and may not be representative of USIBWC policy or positions.



International Boundary and Water Commission United States Section

DROUGHT CONDITIONS AFFECT TRANSBOUNDARY WATER RESOURCES

July 2015

Upper Rio Grande – Under the Convention of 1906, the United States delivers Rio Grande water to Mexico at Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. This water, which originates as snowmelt runoff from the Rocky Mountains, is stored in Elephant Butte and Caballo Reservoirs in New Mexico as part of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation's Rio Grande Project. Due to drought, water allocations for farmers in New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua, and the City of El Paso, Texas were cut drastically for 2011-2014, ranging from 6% to 43% of a full supply. Water allocations for 2015 are 59% of a full supply. Regional water users have relied heavily on ground water pumping to offset the loss of surface water and the long-term impact on this underground reserve source has yet to be fully determined.

Lower Rio Grande – In the Lower Rio Grande region below El Paso, Texas to the Gulf of Mexico, Mexico delivers water to the United States from Mexican tributaries of the Rio Grande, in accordance with the 1944 Water Treaty. The treaty requires Mexico to deliver an annual average of 350,000 acre-feet in cycles of five years except in the event of extraordinary drought. During the current five-year cycle, which began October 25, 2010, Mexico is behind in its deliveries by approximately 325,000 acre-feet. This deficit affects municipalities, industry and farmers in South Texas and has resulted in a serious economic impact to the region.

Colorado River – The Colorado River supplies water to seven states in the United States and two in Mexico. Under the 1944 Water Treaty, the United States delivers 1.5 million acre-feet of water per year to Mexico, an obligation it has always met. The current 15-year period is the driest in over 100 years of historical record. The two largest Colorado River Basin storage reservoirs, Lakes Powell and Mead, which were essentially full in 1999, have dropped significantly. On July 22, 2015, Lake Powell was at 54% of capacity and Lake Mead was 37.5%. Monthly forecasts have varied considerably in 2015. Model runs performed earlier this spring indicated a likelihood of reductions in water deliveries to the lower basin, including Mexico, by as early as 2016 due to low levels at Lake Mead but then late-season precipitation prompted revised forecasts, showing improved conditions through 2017.

For more information:

Sally Spener

915-832-4175

sally.spener@ibwc.gov