Rio Grande Citizens Forum
USIBWC Headquarters
El Paso, TX
September 15, 2010
*Tentative Meeting Notes

Board Members in Attendance
Marie Eichelmann for Mary Francis Keisling, Save the Valley
Conrad Keyes, Jr.
Louis Irwin
Sal Masoud
Doug Echlin
John Balliew

USIBWC Staff in Attendance
Carlos Peña
Sally Spener
Gloria Gutierrez
Elizabeth Verdecchia
Leslie Grijalva
Gabriel Duran
Duane Price
Sheryl Franklin
Jose Nuñez
Michael Armistead
Hugo White
Tony Solo

Members of the Public in Attendance
Chris Brown, New Mexico State University
Duane Hanson, Watershed Coordinator, New Mexico Department of Agriculture
Luzma Nava, New Mexico State University
Espy Guillen, Raba Kistner
Bill Hoover, Texas Master Naturalists
Chris Canavan, New Mexico Environment Department
Susan Reese, citizen
Brian Claybourn, Tetratech
Leslie Heiberg, member of the press
Vanessa Lougheed, University of Texas at El Paso Biology Department
Gloria Villaverde, Friends of the Rio Bosque
Gerardo Melendez, Hydrotech, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS)
Rob Henrion, USGS
Miguel Teran, CPME LLC
Jessica Garza, City Secretary, Village of Vinton
Michael Coleman, Texas Faculty Association
Dave Brosman, El Paso Water Utilities

Woody Irving, Reclamation
Mike Landis, Reclamation
Gina Posada, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
Dennis Roark, citizen
Martha Ortiz, FXSA, Inc.
Isabel Valenciana, Business Development Director, FXSA
Frank Spencer
Clarence Sperbeck, Save the Valley
Naomi Waissman, teacher, El Paso Community College
Brenda Barnes, senior project manager, AMEC, resident near the river
Yesenia Castro, AMEC
Hector Garza, USGS
Bryan Pula, USGS

Water Quality in the Lower Rio Grande in New Mexico

Brian Hanson, Watershed Coordinator, 319 (h) Grant, New Mexico Department of Agriculture, New Mexico State University, discussed the Paso del Norte Watershed Council, a diverse group of interests in the region interested in the Rio Grande watershed between Elephant Butte Dam in New Mexico and the Conchos River confluence in Texas.

Chris Canavan, 319 (h) Project Officer, New Mexico Environment Department, discussed Phase I of the *E. coli* bacteria pollution study being undertaken in the lower 100 miles of the Rio Grande in New Mexico. The Paso del Norte Watershed Council received a grant through the 319 process, money allocated to EPA and then to the state, awarded through a request for proposals process. In a previous Phase I study in 2006, there had been exceedances of *E. coli* bacteria.

The stakeholders want to produce a watershed plan to address *E. coli* bacteria pollution. There are various elements of a watershed plan, including such things as identification of causes and sources of impairment, outreach, estimate of resources needed, implementation of best management practices or mitigation measures, and monitoring.

A grant was received in 2006 and a report was produced. The document concluded there was not enough data to determine the source of *E. coli.* So the report recommended doing a better data collection effort and study to help identify the source of the contamination. *E. coli* is present in the intestines of all warm-blooded animals and there are ways to determine what type of animal the host is. There was a 2-year gap in funding for the Watershed Council. Elephant Butte Irrigation District and New Mexico State University started a study and the Watershed Council is now taking it on as Phase II.

Mr. Hanson continued with discussion of Phase II, a 2-year study during which a report will be prepared. They want to collect more data and want to do outreach to stakeholders on their ideas of solutions, and then zero in on where in the watershed there are problems and determine what kind of animal is producing the *E. coli.*

We are doing basic monthly water quality sampling in the Rio Grande and determining concentrations of *E. coli.* We want to determine if *E. coli* is a serious problem because there were indications before that it is. We want to know if it is

happening year-round or just certain times, and how it is being introduced into the Rio Grande. We are also collecting samples from drains and arroyos during storms. There is also bacteria source tracking to determine if it is coming from leaking septic tanks, wildlife (like geese), livestock, etc.

Once we have data to indicate where the problem might be coming from, we will focus on that part of the watershed then we will look at possible best management practices that could be implemented. For example, a filter strip of vegetation near the river could capture it before it gets to the river. Ultraviolet light is another effective technique that agriculture could use. Those are examples of best management practices. The Phase II report will identify funding needed for future water quality improvement activities in the watershed. This is a stakeholder-driven process rather than a top-down regulatory process for addressing water quality concerns.

Upon conclusion of the presentation, there were questions and answers.

Sal Masoud – Did your study find a source of *E. coli*?

Chris Canavan – Our early study did a very limited number of sites along 100 miles of the river; it was limited but enough to show there was a problem. Some samples greatly exceed the limit for *E. coli*. There may have been stormwater impacts or wastewater treatment plants not in compliance.

Brian Hanson – We've been collecting data regularly since February 2010 but it will be a while before we can say what it means.

Member of the Public - Are there opportunities for private companies to participate?

Chris Canavan - Studies have already been contracted but with future funding that's possible.

<u>How's the Water Quality? Upper Rio Grande Basin Advisory Meeting and Clean Rivers Program Update</u>

Leslie Grijalva, Environmental Protection Specialist, USIBWC's Texas Clean Rivers Program (CRP) for the Rio Grande, started the presentation with background information about the program. The Texas Clean Rivers Act was established in 1991. In 1998 the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ)-USIBWC partnership began. We have 54 sites monitored by CRP and 38 sites by TCEQ. It is a state fee-funded program. We collect water quality data in the Rio Grande and use it to evaluate water quality issues and implement any corrective actions. Activities include water quality monitoring, water quality assessment publications, outreach and education, and public participation.

Ms. Grijalva and Elizabeth Verdecchia, Environmental Protection Specialist, USIBWC's Texas Clean Rivers Program (CRP), did a demonstration of the water quality probe they use that measures dissolved oxygen, temperature, PH, and conductivity. Samples are also collected and sent to the lab.

Salt content tends to be highly variable depending on the time of the year and the flow in the river. That's one reason why it's important to have a long-term monitoring program.

Ms. Grijalva then showed a map of the different monitoring sites in the Rio Grande Basin from El Paso, Texas to Del Rio, Texas (Amistad Lake). We rely on partners to collect the samples, which are shipped to our laboratory. Partners include

USIBWC field offices, colleges and universities, TCEQ, El Paso Water Utilities, Big Bend National Park, and others. We have dozens of monitoring stations in this area, including some continuous monitoring stations for such things as temperature, PH, total dissolved solids, dissolved oxygen, etc.

Ms. Verdecchia presented a list of the main water quality issues in the Rio Grande basin – bacteria, phosphorous/nutrients, nitrates, salts, mercury in fish tissue, depressed dissolved oxygen, fish kills, illegal discharging, trash, and exotic species.

She then discussed the water quality standards, which vary depending on location and water use. Uses may include contact recreation, aquatic life, and public drinking water supply. If standards are not met for the designated use at a given location, then the segment is considered to be impaired. Impairment means it's not meeting a standard. Sometimes it's considered a segment of concern if it's barely meeting the standard or has high levels of something for which there is no standard.

In the Upper Rio Grande basin, problems include bacteria in the part of the Rio Grande from northern El Paso to the New Mexico state line. It is impaired for bacteria from the Lower Valley of El Paso to Ft. Quitman, Texas. It's also impaired for chloride and salt. Farther downstream to Presidio, it's impaired for salt. This year, TCEQ listed the entire section to Amistad Lake as impaired for salt. There are also some depressed oxygen levels. There were fish kills in the Big Bend area.

There have been some recent changes to water quality standards. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley in South Texas, there is now a sole-source drinking water supply designation. Also, they have changed criteria so that the bacteria that is monitored in salty water is now entero bacteria. They changed the contact recreation designated use so that there are now two different types of contact recreation – swimming is primary contact recreation and boating, for example, is secondary contact recreation. For now, the Rio Grande is all listed as primary contact recreation.

There are also special studies being undertaken. We are doing a metals study to determine if there are metals in the water. TCEQ is doing a least-disturbed streams study that includes the Wild and Scenic part of the Rio Grande through the Big Bend area, Alamito Creek, Devils River, Live Oak Creek, and Independence River.

There have also been various partnerships with college and high school students for hands-on monitoring opportunities.

All data is posted on the Clean Rivers Program web site.

The Adopt-A-River program allows community groups to adopt a two-mile stretch of the river over two years. IBWC picks up and disposes the collected trash. A series of photos showing volunteers collecting trash was displayed for the conclusion of the presentation, followed by questions and answers.

Doug Echlin – Does someone keep records of the tons of trash collected? Is there any indication people are dumping less trash?

Elizabeth Verdecchia – We have started counting the number of bags of trash collected.

Doug Echlin – Is the problem of tires being dumped a function of being on the border or is it in other parts of Texas as well?

Elizabeth Verdecchia – It may be related to being on the border.

Louis Irwin – How do the Rio Grande and Pecos Rivers compare to other rivers in Texas?

Elizabeth Verdecchia – There are quite a few rivers with significant problems, especially in urban areas. The Houston area has significant problems. Here it has improved significantly since the 1970s due to improved sanitation infrastructure.

Sal Masoud – Is there an equivalent program on the Mexican side?

Elizabeth Verdecchia – Not that I am aware of but there are efforts through the binational Border 2012 program to improve conditions on both sides of the border.

Member of the Public – Does the Mexican side not collaborate with you?

Verdecchia – Not on the Adopt-A-River program.

Carlos Peña – There are nongovernmental organizations who do have cleanups. We do collaborate with Mexico on the water quality issues but not on the cleanups.

Member of the Public – Do you have a state-certified lab doing your analysis?

Elizabeth Verdecchia – Yes. This is a requirement of our contract with TCEQ.

Gina Posada, TCEQ – Suggests a future agenda item about any cleanups that may be occurring on the Mexican side.

Update on Recovery Act Levee Construction Projects in El Paso and Doña Ana Counties

Gabriel Duran, USIBWC Engineer Planner, gave a presentation on this topic. $220 million in Recovery Act funding was appropriated to USIBWC. We will have obligated every penny of it by the end of this month. We will improve the levees to FEMA standards. Recovery Act funds are to jumpstart the economy, create jobs, and improve infrastructure. $90 million of it will be spent in this area.

He then discussed the status of various levee construction sites in the region, affecting levee segments between Radium Springs and El Paso. A project schedule and maps are available at: http://www.ibwc.gov/Files/URG_Schedule.pdf

- Hatch, New Mexico,13.6 miles, 19% complete. Completion date of May 2011.
- Mesilla Phase 1, east and west levees, Shalem Bridge to Vado Bridge, 32 miles in length, 41% done, anticipated completion March 2011.
- Mesilla Phase 2, east levee from Radium Springs to Mesilla Dam, 19 miles, contract just awarded, anticipated completion date of December 2011.
- Canutillo Phase I, Vado Bridge to Borderland Bridge, 29 miles of levees on both sides, 16% complete, anticipated completion date May 2011.
- Sunland Park, east and west levees from Borderland Bridge to Power Plant, 12.2 miles, contract just awarded, anticipated completion February 2012.
- Canutillo Phase 2, east levee, Vinton Bridge to Borderland Bridge. We have to get all of the water from the Franklin Mountains into that flood control project. When the project was built in the 1930s, we used the existing railroad embankment for a levee but that does not meet FEMA standards. We will design a new floodwall and levee in this reach. We have a design contract to complete the design. Construction will be done in out years, maybe in 2-3 years.
- Fabens/Ft. Hancock, 15.4 miles, notice to proceed issued July 2010. 15% complete. February 2011 is anticipated completion date.

Marie Eichelmann, Save the Valley – What does this mean for the Upper Valley between Borderland and Sunland Park?

Gabriel Duran – Those levees will be improved with 3 feet of freeboard, plated, and improved to prevent under seepage.

Marie Eichelmann – They were done and they need to be redone again.

Duran – We had Recovery Act funds and had money to do a better design. We had problems with the compaction and thought it better to do that than a piecemeal approach toward repairs.

Marie Eichelmann – When will we know if we are taken out of the floodplain?

Gabriel Duran – We are not responsible for FEMA but we will have the levees completed by our schedule.

Jose Nuñez, USIBWC – FEMA accreditation is also based on interior drainage that is the responsibility of the City or County. FEMA does not want any water to be accumulating on the land side of the levees.

Gabriel Duran – The communities are responsible for the drainage within their communities.

Sal Masoud - The issue is that the maps would likely be affirmed toward the end of 2011. The Upper Valley is shown in the floodplain. The major reason they are in the floodplain is they could not certify the levees. So having the levees is very important and getting them certified in time is very important. We hope for the levees to be certified so these areas can be taken out of the floodplain. I would like to request that a representative of FEMA attend the next meeting.

Gabriel Duran – We already had two FEMA representatives come out and speak to us last year

Sal Masoud – It is a blessing that we have the funding to complete this work.

Carlos Peña – Do you know if levees are certified in New Mexico?

Jose Nuñez- We were ahead of the game because we had already begun studying the levees when FEMA approached us. The Recovery Act funding made it possible to construct the improvements.

Marie Eichelmann – Are they going to start at Borderland and then go to Sunland Park?

Gabriel Duran – The contractor has the latitude to do it in the most cost-effective way he chooses.

Sal Masoud – Who got the contract?

USIBWC Reply – Ultimate Concrete

Brian Hanson – What is levee enhancement?

Jose Nuñez – We determine the height requirement needed to convey the flood flow. In some areas we don't have to increase the height but we may need to address seepage and under seepage.

Public Comment

There was no public comment.

Board Discussion

Conrad Keyes, Jr. stated that he had been scheduled to take over as Citizens Forum Co-Chair for the second year of the board's term but that he is unable to do so due to other commitments. There was some discussion and the board agreed that Louis Irwin should continue to serve as co-chair until the end of the board's term.

Conrad Keyes, Jr. announced that the Paso del Norte Watershed Council will have an annual meeting November 9, a no-host lunch at Great American Land and Cattle Company. At that meeting we select our executive committee. On Nov. 19, Brian

Hanson will conduct a stakeholder tour and workshop, probably in the Selden Canyon area and you are welcome to come.

Suggested Future Agenda Items

The next meeting is December 13 in Las Cruces.

Doug Echlin - Requests a U.S. Department of Agriculture representative to come in and talk to us about the article in the *Big Bend Sentinel*, regarding beetles used as bio-control on salt cedar. Unfortunately they've gotten out of hand and are attacking the local landscape. I would like to find out more about that.

Sal Masoud – Invite FEMA to the next meeting in Las Cruces to discuss issues of levee certification.

Sally Spener – FEMA's presentations from last year are available on the USIBWC web page at: http://www.ibwc.gov/Citizens_Forums/CF_URG.html

Conrad Keyes, Jr. – They are in the process of establishing a Stormwater Coalition in Sierra and Doña Ana Counties, a type of flood authority. We should invite them to give that presentation.

*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.