

Rio Grande Citizens' Forum
Dec. 4, 2008
Las Cruces, NM
***Tentative Meeting Notes**

Board Members in Attendance:

Conrad Keyes
John Hernandez
Al Riera
Alisa Jorgensen
Zay Clopton
Doug Echlin
Terry McMillan

USIBWC staff:

Hayley Goodstein
Al Riera
Tony Solo
Sally Spener
Raymundo Aguirre
John Merino

MxIBWC Staff:

Ramiro Lujan

About 22 members of the general public in attendance.

Groundwater Discharge Permit

Board Member John Hernandez discussed the status of a groundwater discharge permit for a New Mexico dairy, which he had briefed the Citizens' Forum about at a previous meeting. Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) is a party to a hearing on this matter scheduled for February 5. At that hearing, the New Mexico Environment Department (NMED) will hear a request for a groundwater discharge permit by Parasol Dairy along Percha Creek, 1.5 miles west of Caballo Reservoir. They propose to irrigate a 50-acre tract with greenwater and stormwater. That tract is in the floodplain. EBID and Reclamation convinced the hearing officer there was a direct link to the river and the river would be polluted, particularly with E coli bacteria. This is for a waterbody that has already reached the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL).

NMED rejected the original request for a permit and then the dairy went to the New Mexico Water Quality Control Commission and petitioned for another hearing, which was granted. The Water Quality Control Commission has offered a draft permit to the dairy. He is concerned about groundwater contamination, contamination of Percha Creek, potential pollution of Caballo Reservoir, and potential contamination of crops irrigated with water affected by E coli bacteria. They have requested a hearing postponement until additional information is provided by the dairy.

The hearing is scheduled for February 5 at mid-day at the community center in Truth or Consequences.

Stormwater Management for Phase II Municipal Separate Storm Sewer

Peter Bennett, Senior Engineering Technician, City of Las Cruces, Public Works, Engineering Services, gave a presentation on this topic.

MS 4 refers to Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System – a conveyance or system of conveyances that discharge to waters of the U.S. and is designed for collecting or conveying stormwater. Mr. Bennett showed photos of different types of stormwater infrastructure, such as culverts, canals, drop inlets, etc. Some of the City of Las Cruces system is part of the EBID system.

He discussed the history of federal regulations designed to regulate discharges and improve water quality. A stormwater management plan (SWMP) is a program designed to reduce the discharge of pollutants to the maximum extent practicable.

The EPA Phase II permit is for cities of less than 100,000 population. The permit requires these cities to have a stormwater management plan, among other requirements.

The plan lays out Six Minimum Control Measures:

1. Public education and outreach – Distribute educational materials about the impacts of stormwater discharges within our watershed, community events, classroom education, construction general permit education for contractors, public service announcements, pesticide management, billboards/outreach campaigns.

2. Public participation and involvement – Encourage public involvement in development and implementation of the SWMP and solutions. Examples of this are Keep Las Cruces Beautiful, Adopt a Highway, website etc.

3. Illicit discharge detection and elimination – Implement and enforce a program to detect and eliminate illicit discharges into the stormwater system, develop a storm sewer system map, conduct visual inspections of stormwater infrastructure, adopt ordinances prohibiting non-stormwater discharges to the MS4.

Las Cruces has a good stormwater ordinance but needs more proactive education and enforcement. Flood insurance rates dropped a little due to improved inspection of stormwater infrastructure.

4. Construction site stormwater runoff control - Develop, implement and enforce an erosion and sediment control program for construction activities that disturb one or more acres of land. Conduct site inspections and enforcement. Develop site-specific Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plans.

5. Post-construction stormwater management in new development/redevelopment - Establish design standards. Ensure arroyo preservation/open space to slow the stormwater; instead of channelizing our arroyos, maintain them as ecosystems. Implement capital improvements.

6. Pollution prevention/good housekeeping for municipal operations. Practice what you preach! Municipal employee training, maintenance of stormwater infrastructure,

The City is currently revising the SWMP. We are reviewing it and trying to make it better.

Question – Are you concerned about wind-blown soil?

Bennett – It's a phasing and enforcement issue. Phasing your development is key. Don't clear the land until you're ready to do work on it.

Woody Irving, Reclamation – Is agricultural discharge exempt?

Bennett – Yes. We also have a pet waste campaign; pet waste is a big issue for urban runoff.

U.S.-Mexico Border Environmental Program: Mid-term Review and its Application on Water-Related Issues in the Paso del Norte

Dr. Carlos Rincon, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Region 6 Border Office Director, gave a presentation on this topic.

The mission statement of the U.S./Mexico Border Program "Border 2012" is: To protect the environment and public health in the U.S.-Mexico border region, consistent with the principles of sustainable development in partnership among federal, state, and local governments in the U.S. and Mexico and with U.S. border tribes.

Gilbert Tellez and Maria Cisneros are the staff in EPA's El Paso border office who work on water issues.

He discussed the Border 2012 goals and objectives that relate to issues of concern to the Citizens' Forum. These include increasing the number of homes connected to potable water supply and wastewater collection systems, assess transboundary surface waters, achieve a majority of currently-exceeded water quality standards in those waters, and implement projects that improve water quality in transboundary waters.

One project is Geographic Information System Hydrological/Water Quality Modeling. IBWC is carrying out the project through the Clean Rivers Program. Through an EPA grant, IBWC is looking into these two platforms: Hydrologic ArcHydro GIS map and the other is web page data. These are data that different agencies already have but this group that met last year is working so anyone can get on the web page and find the information on the quality of surface water and groundwater. There is a delay in the ArcHydro groundwater model mainly because the information is not in digital media. The WEAP water quality model has been implemented for the Falcon Dam-Gulf of Mexico segment of the Rio Grande. The validation of the model has been undertaken.

Another is the South Central Regional Wastewater Collection and Treatment Project. There are currently two projects in southeastern New Mexico. In the Anthony/Vinton area is a sewage treatment plant that will eliminate the effects of the septic tanks. This project has benefitted rural communities in Doña Ana County such as Vado, Del Cerro, La Mesa, San Miguel, Berino, Chamberino, etc. In Sunland Park there is the new wastewater treatment facility for the City of Sunland Park to serve approximately 6500 residents. This plant is to reduce overloading and possible failing conditions.

Question – Are there opportunities for return flow credits for the wastewater treatment plant in the area?

Rincon – Once the water is treated, it's used for recycling or agriculture; it has to comply with that. The water is used by the water agency there. EPA is currently reviewing grant applications for projects that protect health.

John Hernandez – EBID does spot monitoring of different things, drains, etc. We look at treatment plants along the river. When you put new treatment plants online, somebody has to monitor them. EBID cannot do routine monitoring. Sometimes these things go on for months – like pollution at Sunland Park’s wastewater facilities. NMED should be monitoring this and they have not.

Rincon – That’s why Sunland Park was a priority for funding/construction to address that issue.

Hernandez – Would EPA look favorably on an IBWC-EBID-NMED proposal to do something in New Mexico like they are doing with the Clean Rivers Program in Texas?

Rincon – I will work with you on that.

Greg Bloom, Sen. Bingaman’s office – Has funding from the Transboundary Aquifer Assessment Act filtered down to the groundwater assessment you are doing?

Rincon – Not yet. On the Mexican side, they are already doing it with Mexico’s National Water Commission (CNA) on the aquifers we have in this region.

Bloom – We are going to seek another \$1 million next year for the Transboundary Aquifer Assessment Act.

Rincon – 154 projects borderwide were submitted to EPA, including 20 from this region.

Comment – I live out in La Mesa. I hear there’s going to be a second phase of this sanitation project. We’re currently on septic.

Rincon – I will have to look into that. It’s already been proposed.

Conejos Medanos Aqueduct Project

Engineer Manuel Herrera, Director of Projects, Ciudad Juarez Municipal Water and Sanitation Board, gave a presentation on this topic.

There are 11,000 new users each year in Ciudad Juarez. This project will provide water to people who come from different parts of the country seeking employment in Juarez. We are drilling new wells every year. We saw the need to build the new aqueduct.

He reviewed the major components of the aqueduct project, which is designed to benefit 345,000 people. There will be a group of 23 deep wells with a flow rate of 1,000 liters per second (lps) or 23 million gallons per day (mgd). The project includes interconnection of the wells with pipes for a total of 47 km (29 miles), a steel conveyance pipeline for a distance of 25 km (16 miles), various tanks, a chlorine gas disinfection system, electric power lines and substation. He showed a map of the area of the wells, the conveyance line, and the tanks. It is scheduled to be in operation by June 2009. They are currently testing some of the pipes and are building the pumps now. The big steel conveyance line is being built. He showed photos of the work.

Currently we have a capacity of 6 cubic meters per second (cms) or 137 mgd; we use 5 cms (114 mgd). This will increase the capacity by 20%. We will have to pump the water uphill to the neighborhoods.

He also discussed the Anapra Wastewater Treatment Plant (WWTP). We are building a WWTP in Anapra, Chihuahua next to Sunland Park, New Mexico. The WWTP is planned in three modules although initially it will just have two modules. By 2012, a 3rd phase will be constructed. We currently have 500 families basically

discharging into the street. The two modules will begin operation in March or April of next year. It will have 20/20 quality and can be used for such things as irrigation and washing cars. They are building sanitary sewers, a pumping plant, the WWTP, the entire system. They are currently building the WWTP; the other components are done. We have an emergency line so we could pump it to the city if there was a problem with the Anapra system.

We have been working hard to establish a hydrological equilibrium. We currently have a module of a WWTP that provides secondary treatment. With this water, we have been able to irrigate the Chamizal Park. We have been able to close some wells, substituting instead the treated wastewater, to help create a balance for the aquifers.

Question – The initial draw of water is 1,000 lps. What is the capacity of the system?

Herrera – With those 23 wells, it is to extract 1000 lps. Studies of the hydraulic capacity indicate you could extract 1250 lps but it depends how the quality and usage are affected over time. It needs to be studied to make sure we can extract without hurting water quality.

Bloom – Does this project go to San Jeronimo also?

Herrera – This project is exclusively for the city. San Jeronimo is also building its own wells for its development. The person who is contracting for our project is going to operate it for ten years. The contract requires delivery of a certain volume every three months so there is a disincentive to waste or divert water. It goes to the City of Juarez, not to San Jeronimo.

Update on Rio Grande Levee Rehabilitation in Doña Ana and El Paso Counties

Dr. Raymundo Aguirre, Civil Engineer, USIBWC, gave a presentation on this topic.

Levee rehabilitation is planned or underway for the Rio Grande Canalization Project, which goes from American Dam to Caballo Dam. We have divided this reach of the Rio Grande in three different reaches/estimated costs:

Hatch/Tonuco Bridge Levee – 36 miles \$64 Million

Mesilla Valley Levee 46 miles \$50 million

Canutillo Levee/Floodwall – 48 miles \$75 million

Total \$189 million, preliminary estimates

We are doing the Mesilla area first. We haven't decided which to do next – Canutillo or Hatch/Tonuco. We are presently working only on the Mesilla Valley portion of the project.

We started the project with \$11.8 million. Up to now, we have applied \$10.2 million, mainly to the purchase of material for the rehabilitation of the levee. We have a balance of about \$1.6 million which covers our operation costs, labor and equipment.

These levees are sandy. The geotech advisors advised us to cover the levee with a high clay content material with low permeability, a 2 foot thickness on the slope and crown. Due to right-of-way issues, we are doing the river side slope. On the land side, we would extend the footprint of the levee, which brings us outside of our present right-of-way so we need to acquire right-of-way on the land side of the levee. Until we have that right-of-way, we are only working on the river side and the top.

The plan for present available funding is to rehabilitate 18 miles of the Mesilla Valley Levee. Construction progress to date for plating the riverside slope and crown includes 1.5 miles in the Mesilla Valley that have been completed. Work on the Upper Valley levee in El Paso is scheduled to begin in early 2009.

Question – Are you getting the plating material locally?

Aguirre – It is with local suppliers.

Peter Bennett, City of Las Cruces – Are you having to stabilize the core/main part of the levee or just crowning the surface?

Aguirre – We are plating the slope and the crown. We haven't worked with the core. We are relying on the cover to be sufficiently sturdy to not erode and sufficiently impermeable to take care of the through seepage of the levee.

Question – On the Canutillo portion, does that relate to the border fence?

Al Riera, USIBWC – This is upstream of the area with the border fence.

Question – How are you going to keep gophers out?

Aguirre – We have an experience in Presidio where gopher holes were a trouble. The matter of gopher holes is something we do not prevent or try to prevent. We just fight it. We have crews patrolling 24 hours/day during floods.

Bloom – Senator Bingaman is requesting more funding this year. Will this be part of the economic stimulus package?

Riera – Congressman Reyes and other elected officials requested cost estimates so it could be included in the stimulus package.

Public Comments

Carlos Rincon of EPA announced that on December 5 at the Camino Real Hotel in El Paso, 8:00 a.m. – 5:15 p.m., there is a workshop that is a follow-up of a workshop to discuss health impacts of the 2006 floods, impacts of extreme events as related to health. There are going to be speakers discussing climate change, extreme events, and how this affects health.

Question – Has there been any study made of the effect if upstream communities did aggressive rainwater management and use of permeable concrete instead of impermeable surfaces as an adjunct to stormwater management?

Rincon – The Paso del Norte Watershed Council looked into it.

Keyes – It's in the Environmental Impact Statement of the El Paso-Las Cruces Regional Sustainable Water Project.

Sally Spener, USIBWC, announced a public meeting on Dec. 15 at 6:30 p.m. at USIBWC Headquarters to discuss the planned levee work in the Upper Valley of El Paso with residents and businesses in the affected area. She also announced that the USIBWC has a new Commissioner, Bill Ruth, a former Principal Engineer. The announcement about his appointment is available on the table with the other handouts.

Dolores Hall – In view of the economic circumstances of today, do you envision cuts in your funding for these projects?

Riera – We are under a continuing resolution so we are not authorized to exceed our 2008 budget so whatever we want to initiate in 2009 that exceeds '08 levels, we cannot start until the president signs the budget. We don't foresee a reduction in the budget. Until the new budget is passed, we operate under 08 levels.

Suggested Future Agenda Items

Keyes – Next meeting is March 3 in El Paso.

Echlin – Board Member Doug Echlin is a member of the Stormwater Citizens Advisory Council for the Stormwater Master Plan in El Paso, which is tasked with coming up with a master plan for the stormwater utility for El Paso. Our priorities are due mid-January. So there may be some update by our next Citizens' Forum meeting. John Balieu is the engineer with the stormwater utility who could give us an update on where the Master Plan sits with City Council.

Rincon – Reclamation's forecast for the water allocation. (Reclamation personnel indicated they could do this 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.