



LOWER RIO GRANDE CITIZENS FORUM

Wednesday, June 22, 2011

3:00 – 5:00 P.M.

Hoblitzelle Auditorium

Texas A & M Agricultural Research and Extension Center

2415 E. Highway 83*

Weslaco, Texas 78596

Welcome – Mr. Rodolfo Montero, Area Operations Manager, USIBWC, LRGFCP.

We will be having two presentations. One in the Bacteria Levels in the Lower Rio Grande from the Clean Rivers Program by Elizabeth Verdecchia; and the other one is going to be an update on the Vegetation Management on the Arroyo Colorado to reduce flood risk by Carlos Peña.

Introduction of Board Members

Members briefly introduced themselves.

Bacteria Levels in the Lower Rio Grande from the Clean Rivers Program

Ms. Verdecchia introduces herself and explains that she will be discussing the bacteria levels in the Rio Grande as well as other water quality issues from Falcon Dam down to the Gulf of Mexico. She states the Clean Rivers Program is funded by the State of Texas and its primary purpose is water quality monitoring. There is a Clean Rivers Program in every major river basin in Texas. IBWC manages the Clean Rivers Program for the Rio Grande because of the Rio Grande's bi-national nature. There are three main things the Clean Rivers Program does: water quality monitoring, outreach, and publications assessment. In 1998 TCEQ and IBWC started a partnership to run the program together. In 2012 there will be about 91 stations. 68 of those stations will be monitored by the Clean Rivers Program. 35 are monitored by the TCEQ regional offices (9 of the stations are duplicates). Ms. Verdecchia starts to show PowerPoint slides as part of her presentation.

Public Comment

- Citizen Question: Do we know how many monitoring sites are on the Mexican side of the tributaries?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: IBWC started joint monitoring in the 1970s at major stations such as Del Rio, Eagle Pass, El Paso, Brownsville; major cities along the border. Those stations are supposed to be representative of the river on both sides.
- Citizen Question/statement: For the sake of general policy formation, we only know what we are doing on this side. The pictures are consistently incomplete as we try to draw conclusions.

- Ms. Verdecchia answers: There are a number of additional projects Mexico is working on. We can talk afterwards and see if we can get additional information on those projects.
- Citizen Question: Are there any other projects monitoring? If so, do you coordinate with these other projects?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: Yes, we have annually coordinated monitoring meetings to coordinate all of the monitoring that goes on at the main stem of the river and the tributaries. Entities like Texas Parks and Wildlife, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality get together and state what projects they have.
- Citizen Question: Are there other volunteer agencies?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: Our data goes to the State of Texas for a specific purpose. There are certain people that monitor under our program that fall under our quality assurance plan. There are separate volunteer programs such as the Texas Dream Team, which does volunteer monitoring but it is for a different purpose. So it has different quality assurance requirements.
- Citizen Question: Is it all thru IBWC?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: For the Clean Rivers Program, it's under one quality assurance program.
- Citizen Question: Who is responsible if it doesn't meet the standard?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: If monitoring programs can determine the source, focus on the problem area, determine where it's coming from/determine the point source then it is fairly easy to regulate. TCEQ would resolve that.
- Citizen Question: What if the source is from Mexico?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: That is something that would have to come back to IBWC. IBWC would discuss that with the Mexican Section of the Commission and they would coordinate with Mexican entities. It's a little bit more complicated but there is a method to address that.
- Citizen Question: Do they have a certain time limit to resolve that issue?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: The TCEQ sets 13 years. Within 13 years of a segment being impaired, being listed on this impairment list, we are supposed to have....not necessarily address it but resolve it.
- Citizen Question: Have those standards been set for a long time or are they dynamic?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: Both. They can be changed but it is a long, rigorous review process but the public can get involved in that. It is every 3 years. Water in the river is seen as a source for drinking water but it doesn't mean you can go to the river and drink water. It means that is the supply for the treatment plants. So the water from the river goes to the treatment plants for potable water. It is treated for drinking. The standards are set for recreational use of the river not for drinking water directly from the river.

- Citizen Comment/Question: I understand Matamoros just completed their first or second wastewater treatment plant. Is that correct? Is there some kind of priority list and how do they prioritize their projects?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: Yes
 - Mr. Carlos Peña answers: The North American Development Bank (NADBank) prioritizes all of their projects. They have over 100 projects. The border communities rely a lot on NADBank funds.
- Citizen Question: Is there a wastewater plant being constructed in Reynosa?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: Yes, there is one in Reynosa
- Citizen Question: Can you comment on the mercury in fish tissue?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: The mercury is a study that was done by the Department of Health in 2003 and it detected high mercury. We do not have the resources to do studies of mercury in fish tissue. It is intensive research.
- Citizen Question: No suspicion for the source of Mercury?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: I don't know.
- Citizen Question: Any speculation as to where the salinity in the Rio Grande City Arroyo Los Olmos is coming from?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: We have only taken one sample so far, so I am not going to make any speculations at all.
- Citizen Question: Doesn't the State of Texas have a responsibility in keeping waters clean?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: Yes, but again you have to find the source.
- Citizen Question: Did the flood wash out the bacteria?
 - Ms. Verdecchia answers: That is possible

Update on the Vegetation Management on the Arroyo Colorado to reduce flood risk

Mr. Carlos Peña introduces himself and explains that he will be discussing the Arroyo Colorado and the post flood clean-up. He understands it is an important topic to the citizens and will open up for questions after the presentation. Mr. Peña utilizes PowerPoint slides as part of his presentation. The slides have information from his previous presentation in the last Citizens Forum meeting.

Public Comment

- Citizen Question/Comment: I know there have been a lot of stories or discussion about the weir that failed which caused damage to Harlingen back in 1967.
 - Mr. Peña answers: What was done right after was that a divisor dike was built. The way it was designed is a pretty ingenious way of diverting the flow into the Main Floodway and the rest goes into the Arroyo Colorado. So this allows any flood flows to go into the Arroyo Colorado and into the Main Floodway.

- Citizen Question: Is IBWC coordinating with any of the other drainage improvements that are being done by either Cameron County or Hidalgo County?
 - Mr. Peña answers: In any normal process when we go out and do any draft of documents, we send it out to all of our stakeholders (districts, cities, water utilities). Everyone who has an interest in this. So it's not just resource agencies but also stakeholders.
- Citizen Question: When you talk about construction improvements, what exactly are you talking about?
 - Mr. Peña answers: Once we do all of our analysis, go through all of our steps, and determine, for example, that we have to do some dredging to the floodways to improve hydraulic efficiency, capacity or flow, that is what we are talking about.
- Citizen Question: Assuming the Corps of Engineers gets involved in dredging, you are going to have to get a permit, what alternative use are you looking at or reuse of the dredge material?
 - Mr. Peña answers: When you go through the 404 permits to do any dredging, you look at alternatives. We will go through the process to determine how to remove that. Because I know in other projects we have done along the river, dredging material is always an issue. Sometimes it has contaminants. We are talking large amounts of silt.
- Citizen Question/Comment: Does the immediate project just involve removing trash and dead trees or is it involving the stuff you informed us about in the last meeting? What will you do for the rest of the summer? What will you expect to gain by this? Will you be able to carry more water by removing trash and dead trees?
 - Mr. Peña answers: No, just removing the dead trees is not going to get us back to 100% capacity. Right now we have a small office so not only are we doing removal of debris but also mowing. This is something we knew we had to do this summer.
 - Mr. Rodolfo Montero adds: What we are working on right now is removing the obvious: dead trees, trash, and stuff that we can move quickly. The long term would be later in the summer. We will start at the spots we really need to look at, looking at bottlenecks that are really hindering the flow. That is what we will coordinate with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS)
 - Response from USFWS: We gave permission to do immediate work on this by taking out trees singly, removing dead trees, trimming along the river, and stuff like that. I guess you guys went a little bit out of bounds in clearing the trees. We will be working with you so you stay within the immediate area.
- Citizen Question/Comment: You recently removed live trees at the Arroyo Colorado World Birding Center in Harlingen. If you remove live trees and replace it with grass, it is not going to control erosion. I am really concerned that you talk about removing vegetation. You are assuming you need a certain flow rate without getting independent data. You are assuming we are going to do like the Army Corps of Engineers. We are seeing whole drainage ditches in Harlingen, huge trees that would remove 50,000 gallons of water, torn out and concreted like if it's a city river, which is a terrible ecological

disaster. The Corps of Engineers did it in Florida. They are having to tear out all the concrete and re-vegetate so it would be an effective flood control.

- Mr. Peña answers: Like I stated earlier, when we go thru our alternative analysis we will give the public the opportunity to review all the information we have, all the alternatives we are looking at to allow people to review it to ensure we are following the proper procedures. As we saw here during Hurricane Alex we had areas where we weren't supposed to have water near the top of the levee but we did have that. We have choke points along the river and it was shown in the last storm event.
- Citizen Question/Comment: You have to have more scientific and ecological people. At the World Birding Center, someone told them to bulldoze and chainsaw dead branches and dead trees. Who is it that did the bulldozing?
 - Mr. Montero answers: I am the manager and there were no bulldozers, zero. The only things we use are tractors and backhoes which are wheeled. They have wheels so we don't disturb the ground, the least amount of damage to the land. We used them to carry the debris.
 - Mr. Peña and Mr. Montero: If anyone has information about bulldozers at that site, the USIBWC would like to receive this information.
- Citizen Comment: We are in this era where engineering firms have biologists on their staff. 20 years ago we didn't have to bother with that issue but now we do. You also have the opportunity to look at selective destruction of vegetation called invasive species. So in terms of strategy, I have not heard of any of these innovative necessary steps or procedures that now have to be considered when putting together engineering panels. Invasive species are a problem up and down the Texas Gulf Coast. We have the opportunity to borrow the technology from the Dutch in the floodplains. You have the opportunity to look at what the engineers in Louisiana are doing with the levee systems over there because we cannot afford to make a mistake any more than we already have.
 - Mr. Peña answers: The Rio Grande upstream Presidio area, we had a major flood there in 2008. The choke point that happened in that area was all the salt cedar, an invasive species, downstream of those communities had grown up so much it had actually prevented the water from going through there. I know salt cedar has potential habitat for certain species but also removal of some of that could help in getting some of the flood water down. So it could be the same thing here. I know we also have Carrizo Cane. So there are a lot of invasive species that we do have.
- Citizen Question/Comment: I am aware of how brush and trees obstruct the flow. What is the solution?
 - Mr. Peña answers: When we go out and design some of these alternatives, we will be hiring some firms, not internally, but outside firms to help us on that.
- Citizen Question/Comment: If there is such a large number of them all over the state, that when situations like this happen, it is opportunistic of us to say now we have even more reason to get rid of them.
 - Mr. Peña answers: We are aware that removal of some of those invasive species will help without touching any of the native species.
- Citizen Question/Comment: There is an issue with removing invasive and native species because of erosion. You will be clearing everything on both sides of the river creating erosion because there will be no vegetation. I have seen houses being eroded away at the

top of the hill and you lose all the vegetation on the bottom, you increase the risk that those houses will be in the river.

- Citizen Comment: You talk about choke points and you are talking primarily about vegetation. What are the choke points? Is there a map of where the choke points are located? Is it all vegetation?
 - Mr. Peña answers: That is the next part. Those are just some examples I gave you. We are just receiving that information as we speak. Our next thing is to have a map of the whole system that will identify in a color-coded order telling us this is at 10% capacity and this one is at 50% capacity. That is our next step, to get that information to have some visual documentation that will show us where they are at so we can field verify.
- Citizen Comment: I'm on the Citizens Forum and you guys did such an incredible job when we did have that flooding. I was the one who drafted the thank you letter to the Commissioner. But on the flip side of the coin, this is kind of a hot button issue for me and I would like to meet with you as soon as we get this information and be able to keep talking about things like this. You did a great job, a fantastic job on the flood but on the flip side I want to make sure you do a fantastic job on this issue.
- Citizen Question/Comment: I have two questions: What type of size used, is it for a 9-10 yr event or 50 yr event? Where is IBWC at fixing levees? The deadline at one point was December 25th.
 - Mr. Peña answers: On the last part, we did receive Recovery Act money as I mentioned to improve the levees. Before we had received the Recovery Act money, we had a 20-year plan on how we were going to fix that and improve the levees. We received a lot of that money upfront as I mentioned. A lot of the contracts are still ongoing. We have some design contracts right now.
 - Mr. Montero answers: For design, we only have the south side of the Arroyo for right now and the Cameron County river levee. Everything else is on hold pending funds.
 - Mr. Peña answers: Recently FEMA has changed some of the criteria. When FEMA first came out with its new rules, you had to have the levee certified by a certain date or your insurance is going to go up. They have gone back recently, in the last month or so, to revise that mandate. Maybe a good thing is to have a FEMA representative to explain that because it is pretty controversial and maybe confusing what exactly is required. We are using 250,000 cubic feet per second for the design flood. Hurricane Beulah was 220,000 cfs and was a 100-year event. We use that as our benchmark. I guess 20,000 above that is what we use as our starting point to manage the water that we anticipate would happen if we have a storm like that again.
- Citizen Question: Who is the biological monitor? What recommendations has he been making to IBWC during his short-term project? Is that information available to the public so we can know what is going on?
 - Mr. Peña answered: We have three environmental consulting firms that we use for all of our projects. I will find out afterwards and get you the name.
- Sierra Club member question: I know environmental organizations mail out letters to express their concerns. Was there a response to these individual letters? What is

important here is information flow. So we can make this project, to send thank you letters once the project is done. Has there been a response to those?

- Mr. Peña answers: Yes. Are you talking about the letter from the Audubon Society?
 - Sierra Club Member answers: Well, there were 10 groups who sent a letter to IBWC. Has there been a formal response?
 - Mr. Peña answers: Rodolfo can provide you a copy of that. There was a letter that came to our Commissioner and I believe it was signed by the Audubon Society. There was a response and we can get you a copy of that.
 - Sierra Club Member answers: If you can just e-mail it to your citizens group.
- Citizen Question/Comment: Have you seen the new floodplain model requested by CBP? Does it have any new locations, any changes to design?
 - Mr. Peña answers: I know we have requested a new model from DHS. I'm not supposed to be really involved with that but let me give you the name of the person in our office who is actually working with DHS.

Suggested Agenda Topics for next Citizens Forum:

FEMA Update

Update on the Arroyo and the levees

*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.