

Rio Grande Citizens Forum
El Paso, Texas
February 12, 2015
*** Tentative Meeting Notes**

Board Members in attendance:

Danny Chavez, Hudspeth County Conservation and Reclamation
John Cornell, Dona Ana County Associated Sportsmen
Travis Johnson, Travis Johnson Law Firm
Conrad Keyes, Paso del Norte Watershed Council
Gill Sorg, City of Las Cruces, City Council
Carlos Leon, County of El Paso, Texas, County Commissioner
Zack Libbin, Elephant Butte Irrigation District
Sal Masoud, Del Rio Engineering, Inc.
Miguel Teran, El Paso County Water Improvement District #1

USIBWC Staff in attendance:

Edward Drusina, Commissioner
Sally Spener, Foreign Affairs Secretary
Carlos Peña, Principal Engineer - Operations
Padinare Unnikrishna, Supervisory Civil Engineer
Shellie Muñoz, Public Affairs Assistant

24 Members of the public in attendance:

Betsy Blarney, Associated Press
Eugenia Posada, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
Daniel Hernandez, Office of State Representative Joe Moody
Dave and Judy Chicka, citizens
Dwayne Solana, City of Sunland Park
Earl F. Burkholder, Global Cogo
Ed Guerrero, Bureau of Land Management, Las Cruces, New Mexico
Enrique Muñoz, Mexican Section, International Boundary and Water Commission
Gerald Rel, New Mexico State University
James M. Jamison, citizen
Javier C. Camacho, El Paso Water Utilities
Jose Unzueta, City of El Paso
Juana Jamison, citizen
Linda Vasquez, City of Sunland Park
Martha Ortiz, FXSA
R. Kimpel, Hudspeth County resident
Ron Parks, SUNDT
Ryan Wood, New Mexico Department of Agriculture
Sam Irrinki, AECOM
Steve Ainsa, URS
Susan Saubere, El Paso Water Utilities
Tim Pudwill, ARCADIS
Woody Irving, Bureau of Reclamation
Yesenia Castro, City of El Paso

Welcoming Remarks:

At 6:30 PM Citizens Forum Chair Miguel Teran convened the meeting. He welcomed the group, introduced present board members and the let audience introduce themselves.

Commissioner Drusina made a short statement saying that he has requested to have the “Drought Conditions Affect Transboundary Water Resources” Notice provided at each of the Citizens Forums from San Diego to Brownsville. He noted serious drought conditions have impacted the border region in the El Paso area, in the Rio Grande basin along the Texas-Mexico border, and in the Colorado River region for a number of years. These conditions have already led to water supply reduction in the Rio Grande basin and shortages are likely in the lower Colorado River region within the next two years. He then turned the meeting over to the first presenter. (“Drought Conditions Affect Transboundary Water Resources” Notice attached)

Presentation One – Purified Water for El Paso: A Sustainable Water Future, Albert Shubert, El Paso Water Utilities

Mr. Shubert presented on the area’s water cycle and sources of drinkable water to area residents. He provided a history of the El Paso Water Utilities’ efforts in meeting the area’s water needs while attempting to maintain the aquifer. One such effort involves the “Purple Pipe” project which treats wastewater for reuse in irrigation, industrial, and construction uses. Another such effort began in 1985 through the treatment of reclaimed water to drinking water standards to recharge the aquifer. Mr. Shubert’s presentation provided graphs demonstrating the demand for the summer of 2014 which illustrated the need for an alternative to meet the demand that surpasses what the aquifer can provide. Mr. Shubert informed that there are other alternatives available which include increased mining of aquifers, increased desalination, drastic conservation, and building massive pipelines. However, the only sustainable alternative is the use of purified water. Highly-treated wastewater currently used for irrigation will be treated again in a rigorous four-step process to create high-quality purified water. He then went into detail of what the four-step Advanced Water Purification process entails and how this process produces high-quality purified drinking water. Additionally, he informed those present that a survey found that 84% of persons asked were in favor of advanced water purification. Mr. Shubert summarized stating that water reuse has been happening in El Paso for decades, advanced technology makes purified water safe to drink, and that purified water is a drought-proof sustainable supply to the community. He presented a timeline showing that design and testing for a pilot plant will be done in 2015. Then a facility will be designed and constructed with water delivery to customers in 2018. He then concluded his presentation and the meeting was open for questions.

Question – Are there parameters/challenges of what may not be able to be treated?

Answer – That is being studied by the pilot.

Question – How much is the cost and who will pay for it?

Answer - \$80 million will be paid for by ratepayers and grants are being sought.

Question – Does the water discharge into the Rio Grande?

Answer – Water discharges into irrigation.

Question – Do you have many people going “Yuck!”?

Answer – Surprisingly, not really.

Question – How much is the pilot program?

Answer - \$4 million

With the questions answered, Mr. Shubert's presentation was completed and the meeting was turned over to Dr. Padinare Unnikrishna, United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission.

Presentation Two – Status Update on FEMA Accreditation of Rio Grande Flood Control Levees, Dr. Padinare Unnikrishna, International Boundary and Water Commission

Dr. Unnikrishna's presentation provided an update on the FEMA Accreditation of the Rio Grande Flood Control Levees. He informed that the study areas include the Rio Grande Canalization Project, which covers the area from Percha Dam to American Dam, and the Rectification Reach which covers the area from American Dam to Little Box Canyon for a total of just under 200 miles. The presentation detailed the requirements and standards needed for the FEMA levee accreditation. In addition, the presentation provided a list of rehabilitated Rio Grande flood control levee segments for which the USIBWC had submitted models and documentation to FEMA in support of levee accreditation as of February 12, 2015. He said that FEMA had provided review comments in reference to the statutory (44 CFR 65.10) criteria that included freeboard, geotechnical analysis, enhancement stability, tie-ins, hydraulic independence, and interior drainage analysis, site specific Operations and Management (O&M) plan, and closures. The USIBWC is in the process of addressing FEMA's review comments. Dr. Unnikrishna explained the FEMA LAMP (Levee Analysis and Mapping Procedure for Non-Accredited Levees) process and explained that this takes into account non-accredited levees as providing partial flood protection. He informed that Zone D areas are defined as "undetermined, but possible, flood hazards" and that FEMA will use this designation to map possible 1-percent-annual-chance flood inundation areas landward of non-accredited levee systems and that there is no federally mandated flood insurance purchase requirement in Zone D areas. In the interim, before the FEMA LAMP process begins, FEMA will apply the Seclusion Method, which maintains the effective floodplains for a duration so that ongoing projects may continue and are not delayed. These areas will be revisited when new levee procedures are finalized based on FEMA's consultation with stakeholders. The USIBWC continues to coordinate with FEMA and plans to attend upcoming meetings that FEMA has scheduled with the City of El Paso and Doña Ana County. Planned construction projects under consideration include levee improvements at Vado East Levee, Wasteways Phase 1 and 2, and Courchesne NEMEXAS Phase 1.

This concluded the FEMA Levee Certification portion of Dr. Unnikrishna's presentation and the meeting was open for questions.

Question – Are the closures the USIBWC's responsibility?

Answer – Yes. These will be covered in the O&M plan.

Question – Feels as if Zone D was chosen for simplicity. Is that the case?

Answer – FEMA is planning to map the LAMP floodplains using the natural valley approach. They will have meetings with stakeholders to discuss their approach.

Question – What is the time frame for getting FEMA accreditation?

Answer – Hatch West and Rectification Reach look promising. For the rest, it is difficult to say because many entities are involved and studies such as interior drainage need to be completed.

Question – Approximate time?

Answer – It is difficult to say because interior drainage is out of our control. Dr. Unnikrishna emphasized that the USIBWC does not have the authority to address interior drainage on the land side of the Rio Grande flood control levees and that this is a responsibility of the local communities. Mr. John Balliew of the El Paso Water Utilities/PSB stated that they have finished or are finishing interior drainage studies in the city limits and are working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to address interior drainage in other parts of El Paso County.

With the questions answered, Dr. Unnikrishna moved on to another portion of this presentation addressing the Country Club Bridge Floodgate.

Presentation Three – Country Club Bridge Floodgate, Dr. Padinare Unnikrishna, International Boundary and Water Commission

Dr. Unnikrishna's presentation informed that a floodgate had been installed at the Country Club Bridge to meet FEMA standards for flood protection in this area, specifically to meet FEMA minimum top of levee elevation standards to protect the landward side from the base flood. The residents in the area have reported significant noise from vehicles driving over the floodgate, which, during non-flood conditions, is level with the bridge roadway but during flood conditions, is raised to seal off floodwaters. In response, the presentation reported that USIBWC coordinated with the City of El Paso and installed sound insulation panels. The presentation primarily consisted of describing the work through a series of photographs that documented the installation of the sound insulation panels into the Country Club Bridge Floodgate. The process included raising the flood gates, pressure washing, installing the sound insulation panels and lowering the flood gate. He then asked for feedback from the local residents on the effectiveness of the work in reducing the noise problem.

Several local residents present stated that there was no audible reduction since the installation of the sound insulation panels, and the noise problem continues. It was noted that the USIBWC had a noise study conducted prior to the installation of the sound panels and this study indicated that the floodgate sounds meet the federal standard for roadway noise.

Question – What are others doing to solve this problem?

Answer – This is the first project that used these floodgates for roads. The challenge is to increase the elevation at the road to meet the minimum top of levee elevation for protection against the base flood as required by FEMA standards.

There was a general discussion in which one participant suggested removing sediment at the bridge location to reduce the water surface elevation so there was sufficient freeboard. The USIBWC said it would explore that option.

With the questions answered and feedback taken into consideration Commissioner Drusina stated that the USIBWC will revisit the issue of the floodgate noise and convene a group to consider other ideas.

The presentation was concluded and the meeting was open for public comment, board discussion and suggested agenda items for the next Rio Grande Citizens Forum. There was no public comment.

Suggested agenda items included the following:

- Levee Accreditation update
- Las Cruces looking into possibility of using wastewater treatment plant effluent to create wetland on land under the USIBWC jurisdiction

- Work to address drainage issues in the Hatch area, being worked on by the Stormwater Coalition
- Report on how the hunting season went during the first season in which the USIBWC permitted bird hunting on lands in the Rio Grande Canalization Project. Perhaps New Mexico Game and Fish Department could cover this.
- Water supply update from Reclamation or Phil King.
- River channel maintenance update

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.

*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

February 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. Snowmelt runoff arriving at Elephant Butte Reservoir has been only 58% of average in the last ten years and 26% of average in the last 5 years. In 2014, due to drought in the upper Rio Grande basin, water allocations were only 30% of a full supply, resulting in a shortfall of more than 600,000 acre-feet of water for farmers in New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua, and the City of El Paso, Texas. In 2013, the worst drought in the history of the Rio Grande Project, allocations were only 6% of a full supply. In 2012, allocations were 39% and in 2011, they were 43%. At the end of the 2014 irrigation season, storage in Elephant Butte and Caballo Reservoirs was less than 10% of conservation capacity. Water supply for 2015 will depend on snowmelt runoff in the coming months; conditions in January indicated the likelihood of reduced allocations again this year. 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 289,541 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 to below half of their capacity. Forecasts indicate that beginning in 2016, there is a 25% possibility that Lake Mead could drop so low that the reservoir's water users in the United States and Mexico would face reduced water deliveries for the first time in history, totaling 383,000 acre-feet. By 2017, the likelihood of Lower Basin shortage exceeds 50%.

For more information:

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