

Rio Grande Citizens Forum  
October 6, 2011  
Tentative Meeting Notes\*

Board Members in Attendance:

Dale Reinhardt, Mayor of Clint  
Travis Johnson, El Paso attorney  
Conrad Keyes, Jr., Paso del Norte Watershed Council  
J.L. Gonzalez, Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District  
John Cordova, Raba-Kistner  
Carl Clark, City of Las Cruces  
Valerie Beversdorf, Elephant Butte Irrigation District  
Danny Chavez, Hudspeth County Conservation and Reclamation District #1  
John Balliew, El Paso Water Utilities  
Kevin VonFinger, El Paso County Ecotourism Committee, Keystone Heritage Park  
John Balliew, El Paso Water Utilities

Staff from the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission  
(USIBWC) in Attendance:

Carlos Peña  
Sally Spener  
Hayley Goodstein  
Elizabeth Verdecchia  
John Merino  
Leslie Grijalva  
Rebecca Little Owl  
Andrea Glover  
Isela Canava  
Sheryl Franklin  
Tony Solo  
Steve Lyell

Members of the Public in Attendance:

Jake Rollow, Office of Sen. Bingaman  
Xochitl Torres, Office of Sen. Udall  
Ann Todd, Save the Valley  
Earl Burkholder, New Mexico State University retired  
Tom Moore, New Mexico State University  
Luzma Fabiola Nava Jimenez, New Mexico State University  
Nicolas Chapa, Ninyo and Moore  
Ben Stewart, MWH Americas  
Brian Baden, SWCA  
Martha Payan, Tornillo resident  
Ismael Payan, Tornillo farmer  
Naomi Waissman, El Paso Community College  
Brenda Barnes, AMEC

Yesenia Castro, AMEC  
Jim O'Connor, El Paso resident  
Mike Landis, Reclamation  
Bert Cortez, Reclamation  
Woody Irving, Reclamation  
Gina Posada, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality  
Cille D'Ascenzo, Texas Master Naturalists  
Mary Barnes, El Paso resident  
Sam Legate, property owner  
Carlos Rincon, EPA  
Penny Sexton, KVB  
Karen Burt URS  
Jim Barrerra URS

### Welcome and Introductions

Citizens Forum Co-Chair and USIBWC Principal Engineer Carlos Peña called the meeting to order. He asked the new board members to introduce themselves. After that, he asked the members of the audience to introduce themselves.

### How's the Water?

Leslie Grijalva, Environmental Protection Specialist, USIBWC Texas Clean Rivers Program (CRP), began the presentation.

In 1991, the Texas Clean Rivers Act was passed. In 1998 the partnership between the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) began. For 2012, we will have about 70 water quality monitoring sites on the Rio Grande and TCEQ has about 37.

It is a state fee-funded program involving federal, state, and local organizations who have a shared an interest in water quality. The program collects water quality data from the Rio Grande and Pecos Rivers. We use the data to identify and evaluate water quality issues, establish priorities for corrective actions, and work to implement those actions. CRP does routine monitoring and special studies. Water quality assessment information appears in the annual report and the 5-year basin summary report.

CRP also does outreach and environmental education, and encourages public participation.

Dia del Rio will be held on Oct. 12, with 80 schools participating from Colorado, Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico. El Paso's Franklin High School is participating in El Paso. The students will be collecting water samples.

CRP sponsored a Student Drawing Contest in 2011 and the winning entries are in the CRP 2012 calendar, copies of which were made available to meeting attendees. Over 350 drawings from students in the Rio Grande Basin were received.

CRP is a partner with the El Paso Community College Service Learning Program, a grant-funded program. Students get hands-on experience in such things as water quality monitoring and outreach activities. They adopted a section of the river through the Adopt-a-River program. They had two river cleanups and are graphing data. Current projects are to help with the Water Festival and nutrient data analysis.

For any teachers who are interested, there is Texas Stream Team, a volunteer water quality monitoring program. The teachers get training on water quality monitoring kits that they can use with their students. Any interested teachers should contact Leslie Grijalva.

She then displayed a series of maps showing water quality monitoring sites in the Rio Grande basin for 2012. The Upper Rio Grande portion extends from El Paso to Amistad Dam near Del Rio, Texas. CRP depends on partners to monitor and pick up samples. In the Upper Rio Grande, the partners are TCEQ, universities and colleges, Big Bend state and national parks. CRP trains all of the partners, which use the TCEQ approved sampling procedures and an accredited laboratory for analysis. In the Upper Rio Grande region, there are 56 sites, including a few on the Pecos River, a Rio Grande tributary.

The main Rio Grande water quality issues that have been identified through the CRP are: bacteria, nutrients, salts, depressed dissolved oxygen, especially with the hot water, fish kills, illegal discharging, trash, and invasive species.

There was a fish kill in June in the Rio Grande at Presidio, TX. It was determined to result from high water temperatures.

Ms. Grijalva then discussed the 2010 assessment (Integrated Report). States are required by the Clean Water Act to assess the health of river basins. The 303 d list is any water body not meeting the water quality standards. If standards are not met, the river segment is considered to have an "impairment." If a segment is near non-attainment standards or there are issues for parameters where standards don't exist, then these are identified as "concerns." She showed a map of the Upper Rio Grande basin in Texas indicating segments where there are impairments or concerns. She also presented graphs showing bacteria and conductivity in El Paso for 2001-2011; during this time period, the standards were often exceeded.

Environmental Protection Specialist Elizabeth Verdecchia then continued with the presentation. Every three years, Texas revises its water quality standards. Whatever doesn't meet those standards is called "impaired." In 2010, Texas revised the standards. With those revisions, E. coli bacteria standards were changed. Additionally, there are two contact recreation standards -- primary and secondary. In El Paso, the entire reach, except for the Chamizal Project area, is designated for primary contact recreation. There is also a different indicator for salt in the high-salt areas on the Pecos and tidal zone at the Gulf of Mexico. One thing that was added is the nutrient criteria.

She showed a map of segments along the Rio Grande where there are nutrient concerns. There are high nutrients downstream of El Paso and in the Big Bend area. All states are required to come up with nutrient standards. That has a big impact on finances of wastewater treatment plants. Often the plants can remove bacteria but it's hard to remove nutrients, which can impact aquatic life. There was a USDA study done that showed that farmers could utilize fertilizer better to reduce the amount of nutrients going into the water. There is a work group that is working to develop nutrient criteria for Texas.

CRP is going to do a mercury study because there is currently little data on mercury. El Paso Water Utilities has looked for mercury and not found it. This is going to be a study from El Paso to Amistad Dam at 14 sites. Another study is one that TCEQ

is doing on the least disturbed streams, evaluating biology and aquatic life in streams that are not as disturbed as the mainstem.

The Adopt-A-River Program is a USIBWC initiative in which groups adopt a section of the river that's about 2 miles long and they agree to do 2-3 clean-ups a year on that section. The community groups pick up the trash, leave the trash bags on the levee, then USIBWC crews pick up the bags and dispose of the trash. USIBWC posts signs saying the group has adopted the river. There are sites available in New Mexico for adoption. Rebecca Little Owl is the coordinator for the New Mexico Section. Elizabeth Verdecchia is the coordinator for the Texas portion.

The USIBWC is a member of the Paso del Norte Watershed Council Executive Committee and CRP is part of the Water Subcommittee. The program has received money from EPA and New Mexico Environment Department to evaluate the bacteria impairment in New Mexico and parts of Texas. They are doing source tracking to determine if it's human, mammal, or bird waste etc. that is causing the bacteria impairment. The study will enable them to understand and address the bacteria concentration in the river. There is a stakeholder meeting Oct.21, 9 – 11 a.m. at Mesilla Bosque State Park, open to the public, to help revise the watershed action strategy. The points of contact are Chris Canavan, [chris.canavan@state.nm.us](mailto:chris.canavan@state.nm.us), and Brian Hanson, [BHanson@nmda.nmsu.edu](mailto:BHanson@nmda.nmsu.edu)

For Clean Rivers Program reports and other information, go to:  
[www.ibwc.gov/CRP/Index.htm](http://www.ibwc.gov/CRP/Index.htm)

#### Presentation of USIBWC Adopt-a-River Awards

Principal Engineer John Merino, USIBWC, referenced an Adopt-a-River brochure that was available as a handout. Groups interested in signing up for the Adopt-a-River program can consult the brochure for additional information. He explained there are currently 10 groups that are participating in the Adopt-a-River program. He presented plaques to those groups who have been with the program for some time and certificates to the new groups. The Adopt-a-River participating organizations who were recognized are:

Southwest Environmental Center  
Keep Vinton Beautiful  
El Paso Community College  
Texas Master Naturalists, TransPecos Chapter  
Venturing Crew 264, Yucca Council, Boy Scouts of America  
J.M. Hanks High School JROTC  
Girl Scouts of the Desert Southwest  
Ysleta del Sur Pueblo  
AMEC  
Project Vida Ecoclub

#### Update on Rio Grande Levee Construction

Andrea Glover, Civil Engineer, USIBWC, presented an update on Rio Grande levee construction in the greater El Paso-Las Cruces region.

When FEMA began updating the Flood Insurance Rate Maps and came up with new standards for flood control systems, they asked USIBWC to certify the levees as being in compliance with those standards. The standards require the levees to be three

feet higher than the 100-year flood, which has a 1% chance of occurring in any given year. They must also be structurally sound.

The USIBWC received \$220 million in funding for levee rehabilitation from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, with \$115.4 million used for the Upper Rio Grande levees in New Mexico and El Paso, Hudspeth, and Presidio Counties, Texas.

She showed a simple diagram of how levees are built. With the levee rehabilitation, USIBWC is putting two feet of compacted clay surface on the river side and on the top of the levee. There is going to be a new gravel top and a toe drain to relieve upwelling pressure that can seep and cause structural problems.

She explained the various ways in which a levee can fail, including overtopping where the water is higher than the levee, which causes massive erosion. You could also have side slope failure, underseepage where water comes up underneath and causes sand boils or seepage through the levee.

She provided the status of levee construction and design in the various segments where work is being undertaken:

**Hatch**, New Mexico: 14 miles of levee work. The project is complete except for some sluice gates on back order. Anticipated completion in November 2011.

**Mesilla Phase 1**, 33.4 miles of levee from Shalem Colony Bridge to Mesilla Bosque State Park on the west side and levees on both sides of the river from Mesilla Dam to the Vado Bridge. Anticipated completion in November 2011.

**Mesilla Phase 2**, 20 miles from south of Ft. Selden to Mesilla Dam on the east side of the river. Anticipated completion in February 2012.

**Canutillo Phase 1**, 29 levee miles between Vado Bridge and Borderland Bridge (except for a segment on the east side). Embankment work is complete but still pending are floodgates at Canutillo and Borderland Bridges.

**Sunland Park**, 13 miles of levee on both sides of the river from Borderland Bridge to El Paso Electric Company Power Plant. Anticipated completion in February 2012.

**Vado** design is complete for 1.1 miles near Vado where the river is close to the railroad tracks. Estimated construction in 2013 depending on funding.

**Canutillo Phase 2** design is for 5.7 miles on the east side from Vinton Bridge to Borderland Bridge. Design is expected to be completed in December 2011. Depending on funding, phased construction could occur 2014-2016.

**Courchesne** design is for 3.8 miles of levee in El Paso between the Rio Grande Power Plant and American Dam. Design is expected to be completed in October 2011. Depending on funding, construction could occur in 2017.

**Socorro to Fabens** design for 16 miles expected to be completed in October 2011. Current estimate is for construction to occur in 2014 or later depending on funding.

She then showed photos of the levee construction. With wider levees, the drainage/irrigation structures that go through them need to be extended.

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

Mr. Moore discussed the importance of maintaining the Rio Grande Project survey monuments and centerline markers on the levees because some of the farmland and other property in the area was surveyed using these reference points. He also stated that the datums used by FEMA to establish flood elevations will be adjusted in 2020 and

this could affect how FEMA maps the water surface elevation. USIBWC staff responded that the boundary markers have not moved. Any monuments that have been disturbed will be replaced eventually. Through hydraulic modeling, the USIBWC will demonstrate to FEMA the ability to convey flood flows, regardless of any adjustments to the datums.

Mr. Landis expressed his appreciation for the levee rehabilitation project because, when completed, this will mean that nearby residents will not be required to purchase flood insurance by FEMA. The audience applauded to show its appreciation.

A member of the public who lives near Country Club Road expressed concern that in the Sunland Park construction segment, it appeared that the levee had been raised but then the contractor came back and dug up the levee as if it were being completely redone.

USIBWC staff explained that the contractor is working on different elements of the levee at different times. For example, the contractor previously cleared and grubbed, worked on rehabilitation of structures and the toe drain. Now the contractor is excavating and constructing the embankment. There had previously been some work performed by USIBWC in-house crews a few years ago. Construction in this area is expected to be completed by February 2012.

For the areas where design is underway or has been completed, they are relatively short reaches that pose technical challenges so the actual number of miles of pending levee construction is relatively small.

#### Public Comment

Carlos Rincon, EPA El Paso Border Office, discussed the U.S.-Mexico Border environmental program, currently known as Border 2012. The program is in the process of being revamped and renamed Border 2020. The 11<sup>th</sup> Environmental Summit is scheduled for Oct. 7 at the Camino Real Hotel in El Paso, which will include a session about plans for the Border 2020 program. A public comment period about the proposed Border 2020 program is open through November 30. On Nov. 9 at the Rio Grande Council of Governments, there will be the annual meeting of the New Mexico-Texas-Chihuahua regional Border 2012 group with the participation of the state environmental agency heads. From 5:00 – 7:00 p.m. on that date there will be a public information and comment session about the proposed Border 2020 program.

A member of the public asked about any actions being undertaken to address the bacteria impairment of the Rio Grande. Elizabeth Verdecchia responded that the sources of bacteria are varied. They can be from point sources, such as wastewater treatment plants that are not properly treating, poorly-maintained septic systems or stormwater, especially in areas where people don't clean up pet waste and this gets washed into the Rio Grande when it rains. There are a variety of methods to approach it. One is outreach so the public knows they can do something on their own. The Paso del Norte Watershed Council is doing a study to determine what the source is of the bacteria. Once the source is known, such as whether it is from livestock, wild birds, humans, pets, etc. then actions can be identified to address it.

Conrad Keyes, Chairman of the Paso del Norte Watershed Council, stated that a report on the results of the study could be provided at the January or April meeting of the Rio Grande Citizens Forum. The Council wants stakeholder input about what should be done.

Mike Landis, Reclamation commented that constructed wetlands could be used to reduce bacteria entering the river from drains or wastewater treatment plants.

Woody Irving, Reclamation, asked if the aquatic weed problem is getting better or worse. Ms. Verdecchia responded that in the dry season, when the river is shallow, the weeds tend to be worse. One of the best ways to get rid of weeds is for them to get flushed out by high flows. It's worse now than it has been for a number of years.

#### Suggested Future Agenda Items

Co-chair Carlos Peña announced that Conrad Keyes, Jr. was selected Citizens Forum co-chair for the coming year. Mr. J.L. Gonzalez will serve as co-chair for the second year of the board term. The next meeting will be January 19, 2011 in Las Cruces, NM.

Kevin von Finger suggested a presentation at the next meeting about the current status of the Rio Grande restoration projects.

Conrad Keyes, Jr. suggested a presentation about the Paso del Norte Watershed Council bacteria source study.

\*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.