

RIO GRANDE CANALIZATION PROJECT ENVIRONMENTAL WATER TRANSACTIONS PROGRAM PROJECT BRIEF JUNE 2009 - JUNE 2014

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY AND WATER COMMISSION, U.S. SECTION

ACQUIRING WATER TO RESTORE THE RIO GRANDE

Background

In June 2009, the International Boundary and Water Commission, U.S. Section (USIBWC), the federal agency charged with applying the boundary and water treaties between the United States and Mexico, signed the Record of Decision (ROD) on River Management Alternatives for the Rio Grande Canalization Project (RGCP). The RGCP extends from Percha Diversion Dam in Sierra County, New Mexico 105 river miles downstream to the American Diversion Dam, in El Paso County, Texas. The ROD committed the USIBWC to implement 30 habitat restoration sites as well as to develop an Environmental Water Transactions Program (EWTP) to acquire water rights for the restoration sites.

The Environmental Water Transactions Program

The USIBWC developed the EWTP through a Public-Private partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation,

Audubon New Mexico, and the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID). The EWTP establishes rules and procedures for the USIBWC to acquire water and water rights through voluntary transactions to sustain restoration sites. USIBWC intends to acquire water rights for about 475 acres of restored habitat through voluntary transactions with willing sellers.

Why do we need to restore native riparian habitat on the Rio Grande?

Before construction of the Canalization Project, the floodplain was a mosaic of riparian habitats including riparian forests, open woodlands, wet meadows, grasslands, and dense riparian shrub.

© Photo by Adriel Heisey



Seldon Point Bar restoration site

What is a water transaction?

A water transaction is a voluntary agreement, in this case between a willing seller and the USIBWC, under which the seller agrees to sell (or lease) their EBID surface water right to USIBWC. Water transactions can be a sale, annual lease, multiple-year lease or donation.

I would like to sell my water rights to support riparian restoration on the Rio Grande. Whom do I contact?

A water rights holder can contact Audubon New Mexico if they are interested in selling or leasing their water rights to the program. Audubon will process the offers and confirm the material facts of the water rights for sale and lease for consideration by USIBWC. Alternatively, a water rights holder can contact the USIBWC directly.

Beth Bardwell
Director of Freshwater Conservation
Audubon New Mexico
4850 Tobosa Rd.
Las Cruces, NM 88011
575-522-5065 (office)
575-418-0288 (cell)
bbardwell@audubon.org

Elizabeth Verdecchia
Natural Resources Specialist
Elizabeth.Verdecchia@ibwc.gov
915-832-4701

Our river valley was filled with large native trees including cottonwoods, Goodding willows, and native shrubs, which provided refuge from the summer heat for recreation and relaxation along the river. These native plants also provided food and cover to wildlife, songbirds, and pollinating bees and butterflies. Many of these native habitats were lost when the Canalization Project was constructed. The USIBWC has historically mowed much of the floodplain within the levees for flood control but in 2010 began setting aside additional areas which would not be mowed. The goal now is to restore a more natural environment on over 2,500 acres through a combination of practices including exotic vegetation removal, native vegetation plantings, restoration of natural river banks, supplemental irrigation, and cessation of mowing. Water is a key ingredient needed to achieve these enhanced habitat restoration goals.

Why do we need to acquire water rights for restoration work?

Where restoration results in an increase in water depletion or irrigation is desired to sustain the new native vegetation, USIBWC will acquire water and/or water rights, at market value, from willing sellers and transfer them to the restoration sites. The EBID will

treat USIBWC like any other irrigator, with USIBWC water-righted lands receiving an equal allotment per acre like other EBID district water-righted lands, and sharing pro rata in shortages during low water years. USIBWC and its cooperating entities have contracted with Audubon New Mexico to help develop and administer the environmental water transactions program.

What Progress has been made so far?

- The USIBWC and EBID signed a Memorandum of Understanding to work collaboratively on the EWTP.
- The EBID Board recently approved a policy authorizing the use of Rio Grande Project surface water rights for native habitat restoration.
- The EWTP has identified initial willing water rights sellers, purchased surface water rights associated with 4.0 acres of land and is in the process of acquiring more.
- The USIBWC and its partners created an irrigation plan for the Leasburg Extension Lateral Wasteway #8 restoration site with plans to irrigate in June 2014.
- The EWTP has leased water for a second irrigation of the Leasburg restoration site in 2014.
- The USIBWC constructed 55 groundwater monitoring wells at 21 restoration sites to monitor water levels and impacts from drought. This data will be vital to determining what sites need supplemental water.



Old growth cottonwoods at the Jaralosa Restoration Site, May 2014



USFWS plants native trees at the Leasburg restoration site, March 2014



USIBWC staff monitor groundwater levels at the Leasburg Extension Lateral WW#8 restoration site, May 2014

With supplemental water, about 1,500 newly planted trees at the Leasburg restoration site, and about 3,500 trees planted at other restoration sites, can grow and provide habitat to wildlife and endangered species while enhancing the human experience and health of the river.



For more information, visit
http://www.ibwc.gov/EMD/canalization_eis.html or call 915-832-4701