

**Rio Grande Citizens' Forum
May 11, 2006, 6:30 - 8:30 p.m.
Las Cruces, NM**

Tentative Meeting Notes*

Prior to the meeting, there was a field trip to the Mesilla Valley Bosque Park site for board members. The tour was hosted by Stan Ellis and John Martinez of New Mexico State Parks.

About 30 people were in attendance.

Update on New Mexico's Newest State Park, the Mesilla Valley Bosque State Park

Stan Ellis, Park Superintendent, gave this presentation.

When completed, the park will be 3 miles long, encompassing more than 1,000 acres. It will have wetland areas fed by the Picacho Drain, which feeds into the Rio Grande at the park site. He thanked some of the entities that made the park possible including the Harris family, which farms land adjacent to the park, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, the International Boundary and Water Commission, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish (which donated 52 acres of the Old Mesilla Bosque Refuge). The site has salt cedar which is targeted for removal. Right now, the park has 307 acres.

In 1984, there was a study, the Rio Grande Master Plan, which encompassed the Rio Grande from Elephant Butte Dam to El Paso. This study identified the river west of Mesilla as a potential site for natural wetlands and recreation. Kevin Bixby of the Southwest Environmental Center was instrumental in this project. He worked with the City of Las Cruces and coordinated with the Game and Fish Department and the Elephant Butte Irrigation District to use water from Picacho Drain to create two ponds. Since then, the birds have started to flourish and wetland plants have been brought in.

The goal is to make the park as natural as possible. It will not be a park like Elephant Butte with areas for recreational vehicles and other activities. It will be a passive park for day use only. There will be a Visitor Center, interpretive displays, and walking trails. He described it as a small Bosque del Apache. In 2003-2004, funding was set aside for the park, \$2.8 million for the Visitor Center and the access road. It will be a first-rate Visitor Center, an adobe southwestern structure with classrooms inside and out, a gift shop, and programs every week, such as educational programs for school children. There will be four staff initially. Fishing will be allowed but there will be no hunting. Park boundaries will be fenced in order to preserve the park, including archaeological sites. There will be an extensive trail system that will go along the river, through the wetland area, and up the sandhills. They are also considering establishment of equestrian trails.

Programs will include wetlands, wildlife, art, and cultural programs. The Rio Grande Citizens' Forum could have meetings there. A road into the area has been built. Visitor Center construction is to start in June of this year. The road will be paved after the Visitor Center is built. They are planning for a grand opening in spring of 2007. On June 6, 2006, a public

meeting will be held at the Elephant Butte Irrigation District offices to receive input from the community about what they want to see in the park. There is an agreement with Elephant Butte Irrigation District for water at the park. If more water is needed, then they will purchase water rights.

There will be a big outdoor area, an amphitheater, that will be the largest conference area. There will also be a large classroom inside. The architect is Rob Love. The park is not open to the public yet but once it opens they will be pleased for the public to come and see it.

2006 Rio Grande Project Annual Operating Plan

Wayne Treers, Hydraulic Engineer, United States Bureau of Reclamation, gave this presentation.

He discussed the winter conditions that affect inflows to Elephant Butte Dam. In general, it was a dry, warm winter. Most snow came March 10 - April 10 and most low elevation snow is already gone. He showed graphs of snow amounts as of May 7. The graphs showed below average snowfall at all SNOTEL sites. In some cases, there was no snow at all or snow accumulation was significantly below average. There was also below average precipitation.

For the Rio Grande at San Marcial, the May runoff forecast is 11% of the long-term average. Although it snowed in March and April, due to dry conditions, the snowmelt soaked into the ground, meaning reduced runoff. A graph of runoff at San Marcial for 1979-2005 showed runoff amounts for each year. Since 1996, there has been below average runoff for all but two years, which is indicative of the severe drought the region is experiencing. Conditions are similar to the drought of the 1950s, the prolonged drought of record. Graphs of daily flows of the Rio Grande at various locations show very low flow in the portion of the river that affects Rio Grande Project storage.

Upstream of the San Marcial station, they are required to keep the Rio Grande wet for the silvery minnow. After June 15, that operating point shifts to the Albuquerque gage and the river will begin to dry up and will remain dry unless it rains.

The National Weather Service 90-day outlook is not promising for precipitation. average precipitation is expected and summer temperatures are expected to be above normal for May - July. Drought is expected to persist or intensify through July 2006. There is nothing on the horizon to indicate that the drought is going to end soon.

As of this morning, May 11, storage at Elephant Butte Dam was 18% of normal. Storage peaked on March 5 at 503,000 acre-feet. Storage has been reduced by approximately 140,000 since then due to releases. Caballo Dam on May 11 was 19% full. The lowest storage in recent years occurred at the end of the 2004 irrigation season, when Elephant Butte dropped to 94,615 acre-feet, its lowest since 1978. This year, the reservoir will be much lower than that.

In accordance with the Rio Grande Compact, 41,300 acre-feet of current storage is considered credit water that belongs to Colorado and New Mexico due to over delivery by those states at Elephant Butte. Under the Compact, when usable water in storage at Elephant Butte and Caballo goes below 400,000 acre-feet, then the upstream States/users are not allowed to store additional native Rio Grande water in their upstream reservoirs. Elephant Butte and Caballo reached that low level in April and will remain below that volume through the end of this year. In addition, there is a small amount of San Juan Chama water in storage which

belongs to the City of Albuquerque and cannot be allocated to Rio Grande Project users. This means that, in accordance with the Compact, 46,300 acre-feet of water currently in storage at Elephant Butte/Caballo cannot be allocated and released to Rio Grande Project users.

Due to low storage, the season will end early this year. The Rio Grande Project can only release 487,000 acre-feet, which is not enough for a full supply for the farmers. At the end of the season, on August 27, storage will be down to 10,000 acre-feet at Caballo. Elephant Butte will go down to 55,000 acre-feet, which is about 2.8% of full, the lowest level since October 1971. The Rio Grande Compact credit water and San Juan Chama water cannot be released so that will become the minimum pool. All three Rio Grande Project water users -- Elephant Butte Irrigation District, El Paso County Water Improvement District #1, and Mexico -- indicate that they are going to use the entire amount that is allocated to them this year. By the end of the 2006 calendar year, total storage in both reservoirs is projected to be about 145,000 acre-feet. Based on that storage, the next season will start with an allocation of about 10% of a fully supply. Even with average runoff, it will likely take many years to reach full storage at the reservoirs again.

Question - Are you seeing any change in demand?

Treers - I don't see reduction in demand. What you see more of is land taken out of agricultural production and put to municipal and industrial use. Overall, as more people move in, the demand and supply would not increase; it's just that farmland would be displaced. It's already happened in El Paso where irrigation water has been converted to City of El Paso use. Las Cruces may have to do that in the future.

Question - Is there any point at which you stop making annual releases?

Treers - There has never been a year when we released nothing.

Mr. Salopek - Is evaporation figured into credit waters?

Bert Cortez - Under new rules put into effect by the Rio Grande Compact Commission, the full credit is maintained until February of the next year at which point a deduction is taken for evaporation.

Mr. Treers continued with his presentation. Elephant Butte will continue to drop through the end of August when it will be 10 feet lower than it was at the low point 2 years ago. Compared to last year, the lake will be 11 feet lower on Memorial Day, 33.5 feet lower on July 4, and almost 48 feet lower at the end of August. Even at its low point, it's still the largest lake in New Mexico as measured by surface area. This year, it will reach its lowest since 1971; it would be even lower if there weren't credit waters. The lowest point ever was August 1954, when storage was 9900 acre-feet or just 0.5% full. After the long-term drought of the 1950s, it took about 25 years to get back up to full storage.

The current allocation to water users is just over 50% of a full supply. Projections are that the allocation will reach just over 53% of a full supply by the end of the season. To make up for this shortfall, a lot of farmers will pump groundwater if they have the ability to do so.

Regarding the schedule, releases to Mexico started with those for U.S. users in early March. At Mexico's request, releases to Mexico were shut off on May 3 and will resume June 12. The other water users have requested a continuous release through the end of August.

Project Update and Release of Draft Survey for the Paso del Norte Watershed Council
Coordinated Database and GIS Project

Citizens' Forum Co-Chair Michael Fahy made brief introductory remarks. He noted the interest of the Paso del Norte Watershed Council in receiving feedback from database users by means of a survey. Interested parties can provide their e-mail address in order to receive the survey. He also mentioned the importance of funding from the Bureau of Reclamation through its Water 2025 program for the separate but linked proposals of the El Paso Water Utilities, Elephant Butte Irrigation District, and City of Las Cruces.

Dr. Christopher Brown of the New Mexico State University Geography Department then proceeded with the formal presentation. He noted that the Paso del Norte Watershed Council had decided not to do a paper survey and will instead do the survey electronically/online. He asked people to put their e-mail addresses on the sign-in sheet being circulated and it was stated that this sign-in sheet would be used to contact people by e-mail who might be interested in participating in the survey.

He provided background information about the New Mexico-Texas Water Commission, a regional water resource management mechanism established as a cooperative mechanism in lieu of litigation among water users that had occurred during the 1980s. Parties in the Commission include irrigation districts, local government, water utilities, and academic institutions in the El Paso-Las Cruces region. The Commission is intended to work regionally on water resource planning and management. As a result of this effort, the Commission developed the El Paso-Las Cruces Regional Sustainable Water Project, which contemplated a number of large water infrastructure projects. Environmental mitigation concerns associated with the plan led to formation of the Paso del Norte Watershed Council to deal with mitigation and restoration activities. The Council, an advisory body to the New Mexico-Texas Water Commission, is doing the database project. The idea is to balance water-related resources to benefit the Rio Grande ecosystem and watershed users.

For some time, there has been interest among regional stakeholders in gaining access to additional water resource data. Conrad Keyes of the Watershed Council had the idea of developing the water resource data project. El Paso Water Utilities, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation have funded various phases of it.

The goal is to provide coordinated access to water resource data sources. By doing this, it is intended to enhance water resource management in the region.

There has been significant progress to date. The website is operational, serving a range of water resource data in the Paso del Norte Region. Related GIS data and metadata are also served at the website. There is a link to the Riverware modeling work that is being done as part of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's Upper Rio Grande Water Operations Model (URGOM). There is also the ongoing effort to do a needs assessment of previous or potential users of the database. The results of the user needs assessment will drive future revisions to the project website.

The needs assessment asks two sets of related questions: 1)What types of data and utilities do users want? 2)How has the experience been with use of the existing website and what suggestions can be made? The survey will be administered online at the project website in the near future, allowing survey results to be compiled automatically.

The website for public access is: <http://river.nmsu.edu/website/pdnwc4/>

Some of the ideas for future work include incorporating data sources for such things as groundwater, stormwater runoff and best management practices, land use data for future land use

modeling efforts, groundwater-surface water interaction, and to expand links to other regional water resource database projects.

The project is a tri-state, binational coordinated database compilation and sharing effort.

He then did a live demonstration of the database website. It does not require any special software, just an internet browser. Some of the data that can be accessed include Clean Rivers Program data from the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission, mapping data, metadata (the data about the data, source of the data, when it was last updated, etc.), U.S. Army Corps of Engineers digital ortho quarter quads and E-topo files, hydrologic modeling, and an interactive map with links to databases compiled by other entities. He gave an example of how a researcher modeling flood flows could obtain a hydrograph and Excel file for a particular flood scenario.

Board Discussion, Suggested Future Agenda Items

The next Citizens' Forum meeting will be in mid-August in El Paso, TX at USIBWC Headquarters. Co-Chair Fahy noted that there was a backlog of agenda items that had previously been suggested. No additional agenda items were suggested and there was no further discussion.

*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.