

RIO GRANDE CITIZENS FORUM
USIBWC Headquarters
El Paso, Texas
January 9, 2020
*** Tentative Meeting Notes**

Board Members in attendance:

Blanca Trout, Canutillo Independent School District
Jim Maxfield, Mid-West Textile Co., Save the Valley
Mark Calamia, National Park Service
Yvonne Curry, Conde, Inc.
Danny Chavez, Hudspeth County Conservation and Reclamation
Philip Partridge, Outdoor recreation enthusiast
Walton Low, Retired, U.S. Geological Survey

U.S. Section, International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) Staff in attendance:

Jayne Harkins, Commissioner, USIBWC
Rosie Montes, Upper Rio Grande Field Office Area Operations Manager
Sally Spener, Foreign Affairs Officer
Lori Kuczmanski, Public Affairs Officer

30 Members of the public in attendance

Welcoming Remarks:

At 6:30 PM, Rosie Montes convened the meeting. She welcomed the group, introduced board members and allowed the audience to introduce themselves. The first presentation was announced.

Letter of Map Revisions (LOMR), Alan Shubert, P.E. Vice President of Operations and Technical Services, El Paso Water

Alan Shubert presented on the El Paso Letter of Map Revision (LOMR). LOMR is FEMA's modification to an effective Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM) and/or Flood Boundary/Floodway.

FIRM is the official flood insurance map of a community on which FEMA has indicated the flood hazard areas and the risk premium zones for the community.

The two most recent LOMRs by El Paso Water and County of El Paso are the Northeast LOMR which was effective January 2018, and the Pico Norte LOMR which was effective December 2019.

For the Northeast, he showed maps of the affected area and photos of flooding that has occurred.

The Northeast Channel 2 Improvements included 19,000 ± linear feet of channel to contain the 25-year storm. The project was completed in 2011 and the LOMR Application was submitted on July 28, 2014. There was extensive coordination with FEMA. El Paso Water did public outreach in December 2017. The approved map revision was done in January 2018, and effective June 2018.

Northeast Channel 2 Construction cost \$14.6 million, and the benefit was it improved ± 5,000 properties being removed from the 100-year flood zone. This results in considerable savings in flood insurance costs. With the proposed Will Ruth Pond, and additional 610 properties will be removed from the 100-year flood zone.

The Pico Norte LOMR affects East El Paso. Past rain events have caused damage. Pico Norte Area Improvements are in 3 phases. Phase 1, Pico Norte Pond Improvements, located near Pico Norte Park and Eastwood Junior High, were completed in 2016 at a construction cost of \$2 million. The project included excavation and expansion of the pond, improved pond side slopes, improved drainage structures, and a new perimeter rock wall. Phase 2 was Sam Snead Storm Drain Improvements. Phase 3 is Bywood Drive Drainage System Improvements.

Pico Norte LOMR Application was submitted to FEMA on 5/21/19 and became effective December 2019. The Pico Norte Pond Expansion cost \$2 million, removed 1110 properties from the flood zone, with a flood insurance cost savings of \$2 million.

Mr. Shubert also discussed the Interior Drainage Study, a drainage analysis required by FEMA to certify the levees that provide protection to the City. Its purpose is to determine the effects of the Rio Grande at different stages (high and low) on the levee and the interior drainage systems. It is used to determine flood risk in urban areas.

In 2009, El Paso Water and El Paso County entered into an Interlocal Agreement as a collaborative effort to develop regional Stormwater Planning. In 2018, El Paso County had an interest in studying and developing a masterplan for the Montana Sector of the county that was not included in the original El Paso County Masterplan. Both El Paso Water and El Paso County had also identified a need to complete a countywide Interior Drainage Study in order to certify levees within the county limits.

Following flooding that occurred in 2006, various entities have undertaken significant stormwater infrastructure improvements and studies over the years since, including Rio Grande levee improvements undertaken by the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission.

For the Interior Drainage Study, a kickoff meeting was held in February 2019. Other activities that year included data collection, modeling coordination, and field investigations. In 2020, the draft Interior Drainage Study Report will be prepared and distributed. A stakeholder meeting will be held in June, and the final report is expected to be distributed to stakeholders in July.

Environmental Impacts of the Border Wall—Kevin Bixby, Southwest Environmental Center

The Southwest Environmental Center has joined with a growing number of conservations, human rights and immigration groups, as well as many state and local elected officials calling on President Trump to halt further construction of new fencing and high-intensity lighting along the U.S. Mexico border. Mr. Bixby stated the Trump Administration is building a 30-foot steel wall across one of the most important wildlife areas in the United States., including movement corridors for jaguars and Mexican wolves. Wildlife species will be harmed, he said. Mr. Bixby stated the types of impacts of a border wall would be the disturbance to wildlife, habitat loss and fragmentation, blockage of movement, and potential extinction. Mr. Bixby spoke about the drying of springs, wetlands, and aquifers, as well as increased flooding and erosion if a border wall were to be built.

Mr. Bixby described border wall conditions prior to the start of the Trump Administration. There were roughly 354 miles of pedestrian fencing, and roughly 300 miles of vehicle barriers. He showed photographs of animals able to pass through the vehicle barriers, but not the border wall.

He expressed concern over border wall contracts in the current administration for 344 miles of wall. Mr. Bixby explained that due to construction of the border wall, vegetation has been removed which he considers to be critical for habitat. He showed photographs of these construction impacts.

He highlighted the biodiversity in the four U.S. states along the border with Mexico stating they are ranked 1-4 in terms of biodiversity in this order: California, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico. Affected species include pronghorn, ocelots, mountain lions, javelina, coatimundis, deer, bears, and the Mexican wolf. The Sonoran Pronghorn is highly endangered, he said, with only 160 animals in the U.S. and 240 animals in Mexico. The Border Wall will divide the population and, he said, would prevent access to water resources.

The Mexican Gray Wolf is a highly endangered animal. There are only 131 wolves in the U.S. and 30 wolves in Mexico. He expressed concern that the Border Wall will prevent interbreeding and gene flow. He showed a graphic of a Mexican Gray Wolf's 600-mile journey across the border in 2017. A Border Wall would block the migration route of the wolf that roams between Chihuahua and New Mexico.

Mr. Bixby stated that jaguars are impacted as they are trying to make a comeback to the Southwest. The Southwest Environmental Center has supported efforts by conservationists and ranchers to establish a jaguar reserve in northern Sonora, near the U.S. border, so animals could disperse northward. The animals may now find their passage blocked in some areas.

Snakes are also impacted by the border wall. He also said that ocelots may not be able to get through the border wall. Another concern is groundwater extraction to mix with concrete for wall construction. He then presented a series of photos of areas impacted by current or future wall construction, including Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona where, he said, heavy machinery has torn up desert cacti, trees, and shrubs and the result will interrupt wildlife migration.

In another area, the San Pedro River National Conservation Area in Arizona, citizens are concerned about wildlife migration, habitats, and limited water resources for the habitat. The loss of trees and the construction are concerns for the San Pedro River, which flows northward from Sonora, Mexico across the border into Arizona. He also stated the new border wall threatens the San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona, the Animas Valley in New Mexico, and Big Bend National Park and the Santa Ana National Wildlife Refuge in Texas.

He also expressed concern about increased flooding and erosion, showing photos of wall/fence segments affected by washouts and debris from stormwater, including photos from a 2008 storm in Nogales where flooding occurred on the Mexican side of the border fence.

Moreover, he expressed concern over the waiver of various laws, such as the Clean Water Act, National Environmental Policy Act, and Endangered Species Act, to expedite border fence/wall construction over the years.

Border Activity and Trends FY19 in El Paso—Jaime Castillo, Special Operations Supervisor, U.S. Border Patrol, and Sergio Soto, Supervisory Border Patrol Agent, U.S. Border Patrol

The U.S. Border Patrol, El Paso Sector, experienced record numbers of Central American families and children crossing our borders in fiscal year 2019 (FY19) which created a humanitarian and border security crisis on our border. Several efforts were deployed by Customs and Border Protection (CBP) to address this crisis, to include construction of temporary soft-sided facilities, expanding medical services contracts, re-deployment of CBP officers and agents from the northern border and coastal areas to the southwest region, and the expansion of a border wall. CBP is committed to the protection of the environment and the nation's natural and cultural resources when planning for and building infrastructure in order to minimize or eliminate impacts to the environment. The invaluable support from our

community and stakeholders has been key in tackling all the challenges that FY19 presented in order to keep our community safe.

The El Paso Sector is 1 of 9 on the Southwest Border. It covers 125,500 square miles, 11 stations, 6 permanent checkpoints, 3 forward operating bases, 268 border miles, 180 miles of land border, 88 miles of river border, and there are 2182 Agents.

In the El Paso sector during FY 19, the largest group in Border Patrol history was apprehended, with 1,036 people. The most apprehensions in one day was 2,200 people.

The influx of immigrants began in 2014, impacting the Rio Grande Valley Sector. We had never seen families entering the U.S. In the past it was mostly single men. Now we are seeing women, young children, even unaccompanied children. Resources were deployed, such as large tents to house the immigrants as they were processed, medical support services were provided, and transportation contracts were put in place.

In FY19, the migrants began to enter the El Paso Sector area of responsibility in large numbers. The family units were very high, as well as many unaccompanied juveniles. Resources were allocated in May 2019 for space to house this population and increase medical services transportation services.

Before the influx of migrants, we were seeing mostly single, adult males from Mexico. During the influx, that drastically changed to family units or even unaccompanied male and female juveniles under the age of 18 that were entering the U.S. illegally without a parent or guardian.

The number of Central American family units apprehended by all U.S. Border Patrol Sectors for El Salvador was 56,897 in FY19. Guatemala had 185,233 family unit apprehensions, Honduras had 188,416, and Mexico was the least at 6,004. The number of unaccompanied Central American children apprehended was also high.

FY19 had over 182,000 apprehensions, one of the highest numbers recorded in recent years for the El Paso Sector. This is about a 500 percent increase compared to last fiscal year in 2018 when almost 32,000 apprehensions were recorded.

So many things can happen when immigrants come into the U.S. illegally, to include human smuggling, children trafficking, the “recycling” of children, malnutrition, and even death.

El Paso Sector apprehensions in recent years ranged from 12,339 in FY 2014 to 182,000 in FY 2019.

How did we respond to this humanitarian crisis? Again, due to the family units entering the U.S. illegally, our facilities were not set up for family units. We had to acquire temporary holding facilities, more security, hire food service contracts, get clothing supplies, we acquired washers and dryers, showers and medical support was provided by Loyal Source which consisted of medical doctors, nurse practitioners, and Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT)

What were the consequences of this massive influx? Agents were taken away from their primary duty of securing the border and were now assigned to process and take care of the immigrants. This included daily feedings, hospital watch, processing and transporting the immigrants. We also closed U.S. Border Patrol Checkpoints, meaning major highways leading into the United States from border communities were left open, giving the opportunity for illicit activity to move freely to their destination. The Cartel and criminal organizations exploited the migrants, they gained more control of the border, and an

unknown number of narcotics and criminal aliens entered the U.S. as agents were processing and caring for migrants.

Rescues and deaths were high for 2019. We saw 40 water rescues and 20 deaths. This was considerably higher than previous years.

Questions?

Q: Do we know how much taxpayer money was spent on the resources due to the influx of immigrants?

A: No, we do not have those figures.

Upper Rio Grande Sediment Removal Contracts—Xochitl Aranda, P.E., Chief, Operations and Maintenance Division, USIBWC

The USIBWC has Rio Grande sediment removal work under contract as follows:

- Sierra County= 176,000 cubic yards (cy)
- Doña Ana County-North= 100,000 cy
- Doña Ana County-Middle= 268,000 cy
- Doña Ana and El Paso Counties= 244,000 cy
- Hudspeth County= 400,000 cy
- Total Volume = 1,188,000 cy

Work commenced November 2019.

In Sierra County, the contractor is Sierra Valley Contractors, LLC. They will maintain the following arroyos: Tipton, Trujillo, Montoya, and Holguin as well as Tierra Blanca Creek to Sibley Arroyo. The total volume will be 176,000 cy for the scheduled period of Oct. 28, 2019 - Jan. 23, 2020.

For Doña Ana County—North, the contractor is Smithco Construction, Inc. They will maintain the river channel from Salem Bridge to Highway 187 Bridge and at Rincon Siphon. They will remove 100,000 cy of sediment. Their schedule is from Oct. 28, 2019 with completion by Jan. 14, 2020.

For Doña Ana County—Middle, the contractor is also Smithco Construction, Inc. This section will cover from Rincon Arroyo to Bignell Arroyo, Hersey Arroyo, Rock Canyon to Rincon/Tonuco Drain, and Mesilla Bridge to Mesilla Dam. The total volume of sediment removal is 268,000 cy. Construction dates are Oct. 28, 2019 and finishing March 19, 2020.

For Doña Ana and El Paso Counties, the contractor is Smithco Construction, Inc. This area will be from the East Drain to Vinton Bridge, Canutillo area, Country Club Bridge, and the Sunland Park Bridge to Montoya Drain. The total volume of sediment removal will be 244,000 cy. Construction dates are Nov. 4, 2019 - Feb. 4, 2020.

In Hudspeth County, the contractor is also Smithco Construction, Inc. This area will be from McClintock Arroyo to Frailes Arroyo including Little Box Canyon. Total volume of sediment to be removed is 400,000 cy. Start date is Feb. 5, 2020 with a completion date of Aug. 11, 2020.

The contractors are not disposing of the sediment. The USIBWC is responsible for disposal and is offering no-cost agreements to entities who would like the sediment. These agreements are available through the USIBWC's American Dam/Carlos Marin Field Office. The property where the sediment would be deposited must be accessible from the locations where sediment is currently being stockpiled. To be eligible, the property must be current on property taxes with proof of property ownership. Environmental, cultural, and historic resources review, and clearance is done. The agreement is then

signed by the landowner and the Agency. For more information, please contact Rosie Montes, 915-433-9962 or rosalba.montes@ibwc.gov

Board Discussion/Suggested Future Agenda Items:

The next meeting is scheduled for April 9, 2020 at 6:30 p.m. at Las Cruces City Hall.

*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.