

RIO GRANDE CITIZENS FORUM
Las Cruces City Hall
Las Cruces, NM
October 10, 2019
*** Tentative Meeting Notes**

Board Members in attendance:

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

USIBWC Staff in attendance:

Jayne Harkins, Commissioner
Sally Spener, Secretary
Rosie Montes, Upper Rio Grande Area Operations Manager

Members of the public in attendance:

Clinton Swearingen, Arcadis
Ray Whetstone, BR Ranch
Ed Trout
Ricky Cox, BR Ranch
Gordon Michaud, Bureau of Land Management
John Douglas, Elephant Butte Irrigation District consultant
Rene Leon, El Paso Water
J. Diehl, citizen
Brigitte Fuller, Wilson & Company
Brad Kirksey, Freese & Nichols, Inc.
Karen Ray, Elephant Butte Irrigation District
David Morris, citizen
Rene Blizzan, citizen
Kurt Anderson, Sierra Club, League of Women Voters
Jesus Placencia, Arcadis
Michael Flores, Lower Valley Water District, Clint, TX
Edward Enriquez, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
Robert Kimpel, Hudspeth County Farmers Association
Pedro Flores, Specialized Steel
Conrad Keyes, Jr., Paso del Norte Watershed Council
Steve Lantz
Marian Schwarz, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Lidia Cepeda, Wilson & Company, Inc.
Sid Webb, Audubon
Kevin Bixby, Southwest Environmental Center
Katie Goetz, New Mexico Department of Agriculture
Ben Stewart, Stantec

Mason Liebau, Stantec
 Jerry Melendez, Reclamation
 New Mexico State Representative Micaela Cadena

Opening Remarks:

Commissioner Jayne Harkins discussed her background as a water manager for the federal government and the State of Nevada prior to her appointment to the USIBWC one year ago. Her priorities are sanitation, infrastructure issues (such as dam safety, flood control, levee improvements, and sediment removal), water deliveries under applicable treaties, communication and collaboration, and safety and security of employees.

She noted that USIBWC does not have a budget yet for the current fiscal year but is under a temporary budget through November 21, known as a continuing resolution. In response to a question about whether the agency has sufficient staff, she noted that there are currently some vacancies and more forthcoming with pending retirements so filling vacancies is important for ensuring sufficient staff.

Presentation 1, Native and Non-Native Fish in the Rio Grande River

Edward Enriquez, Warmwater Fisheries Biologist, New Mexico Department of Game and Fish, gave this presentation, covering the region from south of Caballo Dam to El Paso. Prior to channelization of the Rio Grande, there were different fish like American Eel, Blue Sucker, Longnose Gar, Rio Grande Silvery Minnow, and Shovelnose Sturgeon, among others. But they are not part of the Rio Grande anymore. One reason they no longer exist is the channel has been altered. A natural river has pool habitats, oxbow lakes, and riffle/run habitats. But with channelized river flow, habitat has changed, with the straightened river and a dry channel in the winter. In a complex habitat, pools provide a refuge habitat during droughts until conditions improve.

The modern fish assemblage includes bass, carp, walleye, sunfish, and others. This includes fish that are not native but were introduced. People often ask where they can fish. He noted bass, sunfish, and blue gills, among others, are present and can be fished.

Most fish currently in this part of the river are not native. Most are habitat generalists rather than the habitat specialists that once existed on the river. Repatriation of the extirpated species would be difficult without habitat restoration. Adding habitat structures like boulder piles, artificial riffle habitats, and deep pools, would increase the complex habitat and increase fish survival and numbers.

Questions:

Blanca Trout – Is there any restriction on fishing certain seasons?

Enriquez – No restrictions. Our license is for April 1 – March 31. There are tackle restrictions for certain fish species.

Sally Spener, USIBWC, stated that USIBWC Environmental Protection Specialist Liz Verdecchia has previously presented on the agency's Rio Grande habitat restoration work. USIBWC is currently in the process of identifying in-stream habitat enhancements or habitat enhancement in nearby waterbodies that would improve habitat for fish.

Philip Partridge - After they shut down dam releases, does the department support maintaining some flow year-round? Are there any re-introduction plans for these extirpated species?

Enriquez – No minimum flow program or requirement exists for the Rio Grande. Once they shut it off, it's shut off. But the Rio Grande actually stays wet from below Caballo Dam to south of the bridge in Hatch. Minimum flow in winter would help.

Question – Did you survey for fish?

Enriquez -- We surveyed below Caballo Dam and found walleye, freshwater drum, different sunfish and bass. We do see other native fish species but not in the variety as historically occurred. We find largemouth bass and white bass were the majority.

Philip Partridge expressed his support for programs to improve fish habitat and populations such as putting riprap in the river.

Kevin Bixby - Is the department aware of IBWC's program now going forward to restore aquatic habitats?

Enriquez – Yes. USIBWC's Verdecchia has been working with our staff in the Santa Fe office but I am not actively working with IBWC but our other staff are.

Bixby – Does the department stock non-native species in the lower Rio Grande?

Enriquez – We stock walleye in Caballo but we do not stock walleye in Elephant Butte because they reproduce on their own. Between Elephant Butte and Caballo, we stock triploid rainbow trout and they don't persist at water temperatures above 70 degrees.

Presentation 2, USIBWC Sediment Removal Projects Scheduled for 2020

Rosie Montes, Area Operations Manager, Upper Rio Grande Field Office, USIBWC, gave this presentation.

She explained that the USIBWC has just awarded 5 sediment removal contracts with a total value of \$5,346,653.

The work is being carried out in accordance with the USIBWC's River Management Plan, which describes the areas of the river channel requiring sediment removal and habitat restoration. The sediment will be removed from the river channel and placed in the floodplain where it is available at no cost to interested parties who apply to acquire it or USIBWC will remove it.

In Sierra County, New Mexico, 176,000 cubic yards will be removed from the area of various arroyos that flow to the Rio Grande. In northern Doña Ana County, 100,000 cubic yards will be removed from the Rio Grande, focused on the area of Hatch Siphon, Salem Bridge to Highway 187 Bridge, and Rincon Siphon. The segment known as Doña Ana County Middle will see removal of 268,000 cubic yards focusing on the areas of Rincon Arroyo to Bignell Arroyo, Hersey Arroyo, Rock Canyon to Rincon/Tonuco Drain, and Mesilla Bridge to Mesilla Dam. In the areas of Doña Ana County, New Mexico and El Paso County, Texas near the state line, 244,000 cubic yards will be removed, focusing on East Drain to Vinton Bridge, Canutillo area, Country Club Bridge, and Sunland Park Bridge to Montoya Drain. In Hudspeth County, Texas, the contract covers about 10 river miles from McClintock Arroyo to Little Box Canyon, targeting removal of 400,000 cubic yards of sediment.

The excavation will remove sediment from the river channel. The depths and widths will be determined on site. To fully restore the river channel will cost more than the available funding so USIBWC is targeting important sites, such as known sediment plugs, to increase the capacity of the river in those areas, such as where the river, floodplain, and levees are approximately the same elevation, which is a particular concern in Hudspeth County.

Questions:

Walton Low – Are the five contracts multi-year contracts?

Montes – There are base years and options. Final schedules are not yet available since the contracts were just awarded.

Blanca Trout – How is the \$5 million allocated among the contractors?

Ms. Montes provided the following information about the contracts:

For Sierra County, \$776,653.23, awarded to Sierra Valley Contractors, LLC.

For Doña Ana North, \$550,000, awarded to Smithco Construction, Inc.
 For Doña Ana Middle \$1,222,000, awarded to Smithco Construction, Inc.
 Doña Ana South/El Paso \$1,248,000, awarded to Smithco Construction, Inc.
 Hudspeth - \$1,550,000, awarded to Smithco Construction, Inc.

Robert Kimpel, Hudspeth County Farmers Association – Are you doing sediment removal in the Guayuco Arroyo area?

Montes – USIBWC has worked in that area annually. The contracts are targeting areas that haven't been touched recently.

There was discussion of the importance for adjacent landowners to continue to have access to roads near the river when construction is underway. A landowner expressed concern about another contractor erecting a fence that blocked road access.

There was discussion of the need for the work to be scheduled during the non-irrigation season, especially if irrigation season were to start with dam releases in April rather than later in the year. Ms. Montes noted that the contractor schedules have not yet been made available but they might have to work longer hours to complete removal before irrigation season or have a phased approach.

A Hudspeth County resident expressed concern that sediment removal had not been undertaken for a number of years, which has led to flooding along the Rio Grande due to the years-long accumulation of sediment. Concern was expressed that dredging and sediment removal is not sufficient nor would the problem be solved by raising adjacent land by placing soil on it. Ms. Montes noted that this is a recurring issue; when it rains, the system gets plugged. Limited agency funding and personnel have affected the USIBWC's ability to do channel maintenance.

Question – How much do you estimate you need to do it completely?

Montes – I don't have a definite estimate on that but in other meetings, other measures have been talked about. For example, there is a pilot program with sediment basins at the Thurman I and II Arroyos just completed in the spring. Options to intercept sediment before it reached the river could help.

Community members noted their interest in supporting appropriations for USIBWC to perform this work. A representative from El Paso Water stated that USIBWC cannot lobby but El Paso Water has spoken to members of Congress and other supporters in New Mexico and Hudspeth County and would be willing to work with others to have a louder voice and be more effective.

George Parada, a farmer from the Little Box Canyon area, stated the Rio Grande has been flooded there for three years, with several feet of water covering FM 192, requiring them to punch a road through a neighbor's property. He expressed appreciation for the Commissioner attending and the work being done.

Danny Chavez stated the area around Little Box Canyon has not been dredged since the 1980s. He said USIBWC used to have more staff and equipment at its Fort Hancock Office. Former USIBWC Principal Engineer Conrad Keyes, Jr. stated it was done in 1988. Ms. Montes said there are currently four USIBWC operators in the Fort Hancock office.

New Mexico State Representative Micaela Cadena appreciated hearing about residents' sediment concerns. She stated that U.S. Representative Xochitl Torres Small should have the staff to be responsive. Representative Cadena sits on the Agriculture and Water Committee and would like to receive recommendations about what can be done.

Public Comment:

Board member Philip Partridge stated he had recently traveled to Hudspeth County and had witnessed the flooding there. Highway 92 was underwater and there were flooded ranch properties. He

would like the sediment to be managed to create oxbow lakes, to use the sediment as a resource that solves a problem. He offered his support to address this concern.

Board member James Maxfield suggested that once the sediment removal schedules are available they should be posted on the USIBWC web site. Sally Spener stated a news release would go out following the kickoff meeting with the contractors.

Ray Whetstone, BR Ranch owner in Hudspeth County, submitted photos of the flooding he has experienced, saying he hasn't been in his backyard for three years and cannot go to his fields. He said former USIBWC Commissioner Edward Drusina had visited about what could be done but the river has flooded 2-3 times since then, the land has never dried, and the water is about 100 feet from his house. The family has 2.5 miles of riverfront property and it is all flooded. Due to flooding of FM 192, a neighbor used a bulldozer to create a path out. Water has poured over the levee in October and sounds like a waterfall, he said. He said he cannot believe that IBWC has let this happen. He's lived there for years and has never seen anything like it before.

George Parada of Little Box Canyon reiterated they have no way to get out of their property and the road they cut won't last. He expressed appreciation for the Commissioner's attendance and urged the Commission to open up the river at Little Box Canyon as soon as possible.

Ricky Cox, BR Ranch, asked if Commissioner Harkins had been aware of their problem.

Commissioner Harkins says she is aware and toured part of the area six months ago and was aware of recent calls and escalated concerns. She reiterated that it was a priority to get the contracts done although it took some time to develop and award the contracts.

Mr. Cox suggested the Commissioner do another site visit and expressed concern that it is a safety issue if people cannot get out of their property, especially for elderly residents. He urged her to prioritize funding for this work.

Conrad Keyes – In the late 1980s, when Little Box Canyon was cleaned out, it was done by a Mexican contractor under agreement with IBWC. They used drag lines to clean it in less than 2 months.

Kevin Bixby, Southwest Environmental Center – What is the status of the gate that was installed without a permit on IBWC property at American Dam?

Commissioner Harkins explained that USIBWC has not issued a permit and does not have a timeframe for that. She explained that the owner of a brick company in Sunland Park, New Mexico has concern about illegal activity across his land, with trails from cartels or others across his property. A group called We Build the Wall constructed a wall and built a gate over the USIBWC levee road over a weekend and then applied for a permit. The gate is open during the day and closed nights, weekends, and holidays. We Build the Wall has asked U.S. Customs and Border Protection to take over ownership of the wall and gate on USIBWC property. We are talking to them about what CBP would need to take it over and we have not issued a permit at this time.

Board Discussion/Suggested Future Agenda Items

Blanca Trout – More information about what can be done to avoid that flooding situation, a specialist to tell us what the remedy could be.

Philip Partridge – Why doesn't El Paso have a Riverwalk? He would love to hear about U.S.-Mexico cooperation and an El Paso Riverwalk.

*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.