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Unlikely Partners Join to Provide Rio Grande Water for the Environment

Water release to benefit native plant restoration

LAS CRUCES – The United States Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC), the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID), and Audubon New Mexico were joined today by local government, nonprofit organizations, farmers and members of the public to celebrate the first irrigation to benefit native plant restoration efforts along the Rio Grande in New Mexico.

Today's ceremony at the Leasburg Extension Lateral Wasteway #8 restoration site outside of Las Cruces commemorated the first irrigation of riparian habitat under the USIBWC's Rio Grande Environmental Water Transaction Program. [In June 2009, the agency committed](#) to restoring native trees, shrubs and grasslands on up to 30 [restoration sites](#) and other areas of the floodplain totaling approximately 2,500 acres along the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico stretching from below Percha Dam to the New Mexico-Texas state line.

Last year the Board of the EBID adopted a new policy to allow voluntary sale and transfer of Rio Grande Project water rights to aid in the restoration of native riparian habitat. The EBID will treat USIBWC like any other irrigator, with USIBWC water-righted lands receiving an equal water allotment per acre in the same manner as other EBID district water-righted lands, and sharing pro rata in shortages during low water years. This program is the first of its kind in New Mexico and represents an innovative approach to securing water for environmental purposes.

“Without water, we cannot meet our restoration goals,” said Edward Drusina, Commissioner of the USIBWC. “This arrangement allows both agriculture and native riparian habitat to thrive side by side with no impact to United States and Mexican water rights holders.”

“Today we are able to witness a locally crafted solution at work,” said Gary Esslinger, Manager of the EBID. “We look forward to continuing this program that protects farmers while helping to restore a healthier, more natural river corridor.”

The water transactions that restore water to the Leasburg site are the result of five years of work by a number of unlikely partners. “The partnerships established to accomplish this project are another example of cooperation as the best way to solve western water conflicts,” said David Yargas of the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation (NFWF), which administers the program for USIBWC with support from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. “It is refreshing to see cooperation between federal and local government agencies and agricultural and environmental interests on water which is essential to both people and nature.”

[The Environmental Water Transactions Program](#) was designed to help the USIBWC meet its riparian habitat restoration goals. Efforts to restore a healthier, more natural river environment include removing saltcedar, planting cottonwoods, willows and other native plants, restoring overbank flows at key locations, irrigating native plants, and, in selected areas, stopping the historic practice of mowing floodplain vegetation.

Because the water in the Rio Grande is fully appropriated for farming, the USIBWC has been working with water right holders in the EBID to voluntarily donate, sell or lease their water rights in order to provide long-term ecological benefits at restoration sites, and offset new depletions from newly established riparian vegetation.

Since 2012 a total of 1,500 native cottonwood and Goodding’s willow trees have been planted along the Leasburg restoration site. “In a reach of the Rio Grande where the river only flows for a couple months out of the year, it is really exciting to see water in the river bed and the Leasburg Lateral ditch where it will nourish the native vegetation that we have all been working to restore,” said Beth Bardwell of Audubon New Mexico. Audubon New Mexico has worked diligently with EBID along with NFWF, Ecosystem Economics and other partners to develop the framework through which the water transactions can take place as well as coordinating and implementing logistics for the purchase of water rights.

In time, restored riparian habitat can provide breeding grounds for endangered species like the Southwestern Willow Flycatcher and other wildlife, while also enhancing the human experience on the Rio Grande. Owners of EBID water rights who want to sell or lease water for restoration are encouraged to contact Beth Bardwell at Audubon New Mexico or USIBWC.

Herb Galliard is selling his water rights to USIBWC to support the establishment of a riparian forest on a portion of the 30-acre Leasburg restoration site. “I am glad to be part of a solution to restoring nature’s share of water on this river,” said Mr. Galliard, a resident of Anthony, New Mexico. “I was able to supplement my income and now the water will be put to a better use for the enjoyment of all, rather than just the benefit of one person.”

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