Rio Grande Citizens' Forum
August 9, 2006
El Paso, TX

Tentative Meeting Notes*

Acting Principal Engineer and Citizens' Forum Co-chair Kenneth Rakestraw welcomed the attendees. He asked the Forum Board Members to introduce themselves. He then asked others in attendance to introduce themselves.

USIBWC Staff in Attendance:
Gilbert Anaya
Hayley Goodstein
Nancy Hanks
Ken Rakestraw
Selma Rivera
Tony Solo
Sally Spener

Mexican Section Staff in Attendance:
Ramiro Lujan

RGCF Board Members in Attendance:
Chris Brown
Michael Fahy
Joe Groff
Alisa Jorgensen
Denise McWilliams
Sal Quintanilla

About 25 additional members of the public attended.

How's the Water?

Nancy Hanks of USIBWC's Texas Clean Rivers Program (CRP) for the Rio Grande gave this presentation. She received support from Cory Horan of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ) and Gilbert Anaya, Environmental Management Chief of USIBWC. TCEQ contracts with USIBWC to run the CRP in the Rio Grande basin.

She noted that 24 sites are being monitored in the Upper Rio Grande. Additionally, there are special studies related to Big Bend National Park and salinity in the Pecos River. The CRP has ten partners in the Upper Rio Grande, including Amistad National Recreation Area, Big Bend National Park, El Paso Community College, El Paso Water Utilities, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality – El Paso, University of Texas at El Paso, U.S. Geological Survey, USIBWC field offices at American Dam, Presidio, and Amistad.

She discussed the parameters that are monitored including pH, dissolved oxygen, bacteria, total dissolved solids, phosphorus, total suspended solids, and others.
She noted that TCEQ is required under the 303(d) list to identify waterbodies with a water quality impairment. The official data on impairments is over three years old. A new list will come out in the fall of 2006.

During the presentation, data for various years were presented for the sites that were monitored, ranging from 2001 to 2006, depending on the site. This allowed trends to be identified.

She showed maps of the river segments and sites that are monitored.

In the segment covering the river from the New Mexico-Texas state line downstream to International Dam in El Paso, results show concern for bacteria, particularly in the area near the Courchesne Bridge. In the past, the designated river use for contact recreation has been impacted due to feedlots upstream and inadequate wastewater treatment.

In the next segment, from International Dam to Riverside Diversion Dam in El Paso County, there are some concerns about phosphorus, although phosphorus concentrations have dropped considerably since mid-2004.

The next segment, from Riverside Dam to Presidio, TX, covers 222 miles. It is impaired by high levels of bacteria, chloride, sulfate, TDS (salinity), ammonia, and phosphorus. The monitoring showed some spikes in salinity at several points

In the next segment, from the confluence of the Rio Conchos near Presidio to just inside the Val Verde Co. line, there are impairments for the designated uses for aquatic life and contact recreation due to bacteria and chronic toxicity in water to aquatic organisms related to the proximity to Presidio, TX-Ojinaga, Chih. This segment will be identified as impaired for TDS on the 2006 Texas inventory and 303 (d) list although there is some downward trend in salinity. Spikes of e. coli bacteria have also been detected in the Presidio area. A continuous water quality monitoring project in this area is being undertaken by various agencies.

The next segment includes is all the river in Val Verde County and Amistad Reservoir. This is not an impaired segment but it does have a concern for phosphorus. There are three sites sampled.

Another segment is the Devil's River, a Rio Grande tributary. It shows few impactors and low TDS.

Right now, it appears that bacterial contamination is increasing in segments with population centers. Salinity may be increasing at Amistad Reservoir. Both of these trends may be related to seasonal flow of water.

She noted that additional information is available in the Basin Highlights Report, which is available in hard copy or on the IBWC web site (www.ibwc.state.gov/CRP/monstats.htm) or TCEQ web site (www.tceq.state.tx.us/compliance/monitoring/crp/data/storet.html). TCEQ also has real-time data on four watersheds in Texas, including the Rio Grande (www.tceq.state.tx.us/compliance/monitoring/water/quality/data/wqm/swqm_realtime_swf.html) Another web page includes information on more than 1800 sites monitored by 59 agencies in Texas (http://cms.lcra.org/)

She then discussed plans for the upcoming year; there will be very few changes in the monitoring schedule. They are dropping metals from the monitoring program since they have been sampled for years and have showed no concerns. They will instead work

on organics. They are also working on two special studies -- USGS mine tailings report and a salinity survey in Big Bend is ongoing. She pointed out that special studies can be initiated by stakeholders. CRP would be happy to discuss any matters that the public would like for CRP to look into. They also want to contract with a certified laboratory in FY 2007 and speed up and strengthen the data collection process.

She also mentioned an upcoming meeting, the Texas Water Monitoring Congress to be held September 13-15, 2006 in Austin. It is being held in coordination with "Connecting the Dots," a free public outreach symposium to provide a forum to resolve gaps in communication between the public and local, state, and federal water resource programs. Registration for the Texas Water Monitoring Congress costs $100. Forms are available at www.txwmc.org.

John Hernandez raised a question as to whether data reporting e. coli results also included fecal coliform results. Gilbert Anaya clarified that the data reported as e. coli are, in fact, e. coli. Several years ago, Texas began monitoring for e. coli in lieu of fecal coliform.

Hernandez also raised questions about water quality impacts attributed to overloaded sewage treatment plants and irrigation return flow as purportedly described in the Basin Highlights Report and presentation. He pointed out that the problems with wastewater treatment plants in New Mexico have been resolved in part. He also stated his view that there is no proof that irrigation return flows contribute bacteria because, according to him, they are primarily comprised of groundwater.

Gilbert Anaya responded that with the permission of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District, sampling was done on some of the drains, which receive inflow from the Montoya Drain and the treatment plant in Sunland Park. A couple of years ago there were other discharges but it is vastly improved now due to improvement of treatment plant infrastructure.

Cory Horan noted that the referenced data came from the 2004 assessment so there is a data gap. Data for the 2006 assessment should be available before the end of the year and should be out in early to mid 2007.

Lorenzo Arriaga of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation inquired as to whether the Pecos River, a tributary into Amistad Reservoir, or flows from the Upper Rio Grande Basin are the major contributor of salinity at Amistad Reservoir. He also expressed interest in having a program to assess and manage salinity in the area.

Hanks and Anaya noted that the current data do not show the source of the salinity but that new data should be available soon to help figure that out. Additionally, some studies have shown that the salinity impacts are greatest in the upper Pecos River but not in the lower Pecos, which flows into Amistad. Another study is planned since Amistad Reservoir serves as a public water supply.

Horan added that by fall 2006, there should be eight salinity sensors from Presidio to Amistad that are being installed by TCEQ.

Save the Valley Civic Association

Alisa Jorgensen, Board Member of the Save the Valley Civic Association and member of the Rio Grande Citizens' Forum, showed a video about the Association. It included discussion by various residents of the Upper Valley who talked about protecting

the character of the Valley and expressed concern about high-density development in a community that has many rural characteristics.

She then gave a PowerPoint presentation about Save the Valley Civic Association. The goal is to promote responsible development and have diverse lot sizes in the Upper Valley of El Paso. She expressed concern about small lots negatively impacting drainage. They want 1-2 acre lots as well as more parks in El Paso's Upper Valley. They would like to see roads that allow ease of transportation but don't destroy the rural character of the neighborhood. Save the Valley is also interested in working with farmers to form trusts to preserve the farmland or see how they can work to preserve irrigation rights, put protective covenants on the land, and restrict cell towers and regulate commercial zoning.

One of the key strengths is that Save the Valley is a registered neighborhood association in the City of El Paso. Mayor Cook has expanded the neighborhood liaison office in the city, which is a good office to contact for help. When you become a registered neighborhood association, you get notified of zoning changes in your neighborhood. Additionally, you are eligible for grants of up to $50,000 through the Neighborhood Services Division in the City, which can be used for improvements to your neighborhood.

Save the Valley is very concerned about water, especially the availability and quality of water for their own consumption and for irrigation. One of the dangers with development is trash in the irrigation ditches or a tractor destroying a ditch. They want to protect access to irrigation water rights. They are concerned about the drainage and the ponding, especially after the heavy rains.

Some of the current issues that Save the Valley is working on include a proposed traffic circle at the intersection of Country Club and Upper Valley. City Representative Lilly is proposing a public meeting in September on this matter. Save the Valley is spreading the word about that. They are also involved in the issue of cell phone towers; there is currently a city moratorium on new cell towers.

They have also been involved with the Parks and Open Space Advisory Group, which has a goal of looking at the key open spaces that should be preserved. A meeting will be held Tuesday, August 15, 6:00 – 8:00 p.m. at City Hall. Save the Valley is interested in Valley Creek Park, a 36-acre park along the river. Since the soil is too wet for development, they are working to make it a nature park, to keep it in its natural state.

She emphasized that they have advocated responsible development in the Upper Valley. She also recommends registering as a neighborhood association.

She was asked whether the Association includes land in both the City and the County. The Association covers both; its charter extends into New Mexico as well.

Anaya asked whether Save the Valley had considered seeking conservation overlays to the City Master Plan, such as those done to protect a residential neighborhood from being converted to commercial development. Jorgensen responded that they got an amendment to the Master Plan that addresses density of development.

Binational Rio Grande Summit

Sally Spener, Acting Foreign Affairs Officer for the USIBWC, gave this presentation. The Binational Rio Grande Summit was held November 17-18, 2005 in McAllen, TX-Reynosa, Tamaulipas with 200 participants from both countries. The

Summit was an outgrowth of Minutes Nos. 307 and 308. Those Minutes addressed issues related to Mexico's deficit in deliveries of water to the United States in the Rio Grande. They also included provisions for cooperation on drought management and sustainable management of the basin as well as the desire of both Governments to convene a binational summit meeting. Taking the recommendations of the summit into account, the two Governments will consider a binational sustainable management plan for the basin.

The Summit had four broad themes: Legal and Institutional Aspects, Binational Basin Management, Environment and Water Quality, and Financing.

Keynote speakers were Jean Francois Donzier, President of the International Network of Basin Organizations, and Kathleen White, Chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

The objectives for each theme were determined in advance by a binational planning committee. Objectives included strengthening institutional capacity, promoting water use efficiency, preserving water quality and riparian habitat, and identifying financing mechanisms for projects that benefit the sustainable management of the Rio Grande basin.

Presentation topics included projected water demand, availability of groundwater, information technologies/modeling, water rights and marketing, droughts, biodiversity, invasive species, water for the environment, and funding needs.

There were over 80 speaker recommendations and over 50 recommendations from the work groups. Some of these recommendations are not within the jurisdiction of the IBWC and the federal governments. There were some common themes that emerged from the many recommendations including promoting water conservation, clarifying institutional roles and responsibilities, promoting data exchange and information sharing, expanding water quality monitoring, managing for ecosystem needs, promoting regional planning, and encouraging IBWC to serve as a convener of binational groups to address various challenges in the basin such as invasive species.

The IBWC continues to work to identify recommendations that both Sections would like to pursue for follow-up, publish proceedings, and establish a mechanism to pursue follow-up actions. The recommendations could eventually result in an IBWC Minute. Information about the Summit, including a background document and speaker presentations, is available at: www.ibwc.state.gov/html/rg_summit.html.

Rio Grande Flooding in the El Paso Area

USIBWC Acting Principal Engineer for Operations, Ken Rakestraw, gave a presentation on this topic. He showed a table of rainfall over the course of eight days at various sites along the river. In the El Paso area, there were 6-8 inches of rain over an 8-day period. Peak flows occurred on the afternoon of August 1 at the following volumes: 220 cubic meters/second (cms) at the Courchesne Bridge and 281 cms below American Dam. Ft. Quitman peaked at midnight Aug 2 at 244 cms. Candelaria, 50 miles upstream of Presidio, saw peak flows of 29.5 cms, which shows how much the flows were reduced downstream of Ft. Quitman. Runoff from local arroyos affected the volume at American Dam.

He showed a graph of previous high flows in the area. The last big storm was August 4, 1999 when there was a big rainstorm with resulting runoff from the Hatch area. Flows reached about 200 cms at Courchesne Bridge during that storm, below the volumes

experienced on August 1, 2006. He showed graphs of historical high flows at other Rio Grande stations in El Paso showing 2006 very high compared to anything in the recent past. Ft. Quitman experienced the highest flows since at least the 1960s.

USIBWC was happy with how our levees performed. There were no breaches or overtopping of the U.S. levees. USIBWC levee patrols and monitoring began early on August 1. By mid-morning, we were aware that we could have an issue with river flooding. Above American Dam, there was sufficient freeboard. Below American Dam, we did not have adequate freeboard. Through the upper Chamizal reach, we were within a foot or so of coming out of the channel. The flood wave was also contained completely by the levees in the Rectification Reach.

He showed photos of the river during high flow at various points. He also showed photos of the Mexican dike on the Arroyo Vibora, which was overtopped in July and again in early August. It's an earthen dike with no concrete. There was erosion on the downstream embankment. It's about 25 meters tall and there were deep furrows from the erosion. By Friday afternoon, Mexico had lowered the water level; they pumped some out and diverted some.

John Hernandez asked whether there had been problems due to debris at the bridges. USIBWC American Dam Project Manager Tony Solo stated that there were no serious problems in this regard.

Mike Landis of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation asked whether there is the possibility of the United States assisting Mexico with rehabilitation of the reservoirs. Rakestraw responded that the U.S. Section needs additional information about the Mexican reservoirs in order evaluate that possibility.

Denise McWillams asked about the return frequency of the flood. Was it considered a 20-year event? 50-year? Rakestraw stated that the 7.5 inches of rain that reportedly fell in less than one day at Dr. Green Elementary School would be considered a 500-year event. As far as the Rio Grande flood control project, it was very close to the design flow in the river near American Dam, which the USIBWC generally considers to be a 100-year flood. It should be no surprise to have severe damage from that type of event.

Heather McMurray of Get the Lead Out requested information about the estimated damage to the liner of the All American Canal, the old portion of the canal built in the 1930s extending from American Dam to downtown El Paso. Solo responded that USIBWC conducted an inspection. There were four sections of lined panels that were uplifted. They will be repaired during the non-irrigation season. It should not be too expensive to repair. McMurray requested an estimate of the extent of the failure of the lining. Solo stated that it was roughly 1%.

Greg Bloom of Sen. Bingaman's office asked how the performance of the flood control project compares to the levee certification process. What was your perception of binational or local communication? Rakestraw responded that this doesn't have much impact on the levee certification process. As far as communication, interaction with the Mexican Section was very good. Because of the rain, we couldn't get a wireless signal that was needed in order to get the automated gaging station data up on the internet. But the USIBWC was able to receive the data at its Headquarters office. We were in contact with the Mexican Section, Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, and USGS regarding the dike in Mexico. Communications went pretty well.

McMurray stated that the liner of the old American Canal below American Dam protects the drinking water from a large industrial source located near the USIBWC. Is anyone testing heavy metals at that point to see what happens? What is the estimated life of the rest of those panels? Gilbert Anaya stated that the USIBWC doesn't sample from the canal. We rely on El Paso Water Utilities (EPWU) for that. There was additional discussion about water quality issues in this area; Michael Fahy of EPWU stated that the water is sampled for arsenic and EPWU treats water to the new arsenic standard. McMurray stated that there is an arsenic reading that is far in excess of the legal limit. Has it gotten into the water from this flood event? The response from EPWU and USIBWC indicated that they did not have any information about whether sampling in the American Canal had detected any flood-related arsenic impacts.

Public Comment

Christopher Brown , co-chair the Paso del Norte Watershed Council Technical Committee, which was formed as part of the New Mexico-Texas Water Commission, made an announcement. At the May meeting of the Rio Grande Citizens' Forum, he gave a presentation about the Watershed Council database project. A user survey has been made available online. The survey will be sent electronically to those who signed up at the last Citizens' Forum meeting. He also handed out information about the survey and how to access it online at http://wrri.nmsu.edu/pdnwc/survey/survey.html. He pointed out that the project is designed to be a portal for various water resources datasets. Participation and input is invited from the Citizens' Forum audience and other members of the public.

Sally Spener made an announcement regarding board membership. Board members are selected for two-year terms. Those terms are expiring. The USIBWC will send a letter to its mailing list advising that it will be accepting applications to the Citizens' Forum board. The USIBWC tries to get a board that reflects a diversity of interests.

A member of the public commended everyone that there was no loss of life in El Paso during the recent floods.

Archie Clouse of TCEQ commented on the meeting's excellent presentations and the good job done by the presenters.

Gilbert Anaya offered to discuss with Ms. McMurray her concerns about water quality. USIBWC monitors the river and EPWU monitors the treatment but we realize there is an industrial source in between.

Future Agenda Items

McMurray suggested a presentation about the levee above American Dam at Anapra in Mexico. Its drains are plugged and there are four to five main arroyos which drain Cristo Rey and the water running down that mountain doesn't have anywhere to go. If they get flooded, there's no way for it to drain.

Another member of the public suggested a presentation to address the age of the levees and dikes and any kind of restoration program, major upgrades, funding, and whether state or federal resources would be used to accomplish such a program.

John Hernandez stated that Dr. Fred Phillips of New Mexico Tech has done an extensive survey tracing salinity as it comes into the river system from Colorado to El Paso. There are many of us who believe we are in a period of climate change and that hydrology is changing because the notion of a return period of 100 or 500 years doesn't have validity during climate change. He suggested that hydrologists with expertise in this matter could give a presentation, perhaps someone from the University of Texas or Dr. May from Arizona State University.

Ismael Payan expressed concern that there are places where the river is plugged up. You need to clean those points. Back in the 1980s they did a lot of work on the river channel. Rakestraw stated that the IBWC is aware that maintenance needs to be done in the Rectification Project but that environmental studies are required and there are restrictions. Payan would like information about the river channel, whether it needs maintenance, how it should be maintained.

Sally Spener stated that she had received a request from Sul Ross State University to give a presentation at a future Citizens' Forum meeting regarding a Rio Grande basin biophysical assessment that they are working on.

Lorenzo Arriaga suggested a possible agenda item regarding the need to keep a clear channel and the environmental concerns that need to be addressed in doing this work since there is a trade-off.

Robert Kimpel suggested getting a Corps of Engineers representative to discuss these issue and the dams that might be needed to hold back the water.

Alisa Jorgensen suggested a presentation by the UTEP professor who wrote about the flood risk associated with the culvert above Blockbuster. She would like for him to present his findings. She also made subsequent suggestions by e-mail that the next meeting include another presentation by IBWC about the condition of the river levees and water flow. She is also interested in a presentation by the Bureau of Reclamation about how recent rain and resulting runoff affected the amount of water in Elephant Butte Dam.

The next meeting will be November 8 in Las Cruces at 6:30 p.m.

*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.