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Office of the Commissioner

Rio Grande Update

To update local stakeholders on activities relating to Rio Grande water resource management, the United States Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) will provide periodic updates via email regarding the development of U.S.-Mexico agreements (IBWC “Minutes”), computer modeling of water management options, water accounting, dam safety, and federal and state funding opportunities. Following is our first update, related to Mexico’s Rio Grande water deliveries.



Mexico’s Rio Grande Water Deliveries: The Challenges of Managing Variable Flows

For decades, Mexico’s Rio Grande water deliveries to the United States have fluctuated greatly between low-volume years and flood years. Due to this variability, drafters of the 1944 Water Treaty built in a five-year water delivery cycle rather than an annual one. Over the last three decades, this variability has become more pronounced, and delivery shortfalls have increased in volume and frequency. The fluctuating deliveries complicate crop-planting decisions in South Texas, and low-delivery years worsen drought-related crop losses.

Delivery shortfalls in 2022 were so pronounced that farmers were subject to historic curtailments to maintain a minimum operating reserve. Domestic and municipal use were also at risk and stand to be this summer as well. Delivery shortfalls by Mexico not only impact U.S. farmers and cities, but also threaten operations of the binational reservoirs as storage drops to unprecedented low levels.

The U.S. and Mexican sections of the IBWC (hereinafter referred to as IBWC) recognize the impact these shortfalls have on Rio Grande water users. Commissioner Dr. Maria-Elena Giner regularly briefs the Administration and Members of Congress, engages other federal partners, meets with stakeholders, and raises the issue with Mexico. In addition, described below are specific IBWC actions on negotiating a new agreement with Mexico to bring predictability and reliability to water deliveries, advancing science in the Rio Grande watershed, and communicating with Mexico.



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Talks on a New Agreement (“Minute”)

In 2020, at the close of a five-year cycle, U.S. and Mexican water officials and diplomats resolved to develop strategies to avoid these crises. IBWC Minute No. 325, signed October 21, 2020, arranged for a transfer of Mexican water in the reservoirs to the U.S. that ended the 2015-2020 cycle without a deficit, and called for a follow-on Minute by December 2023 to make future deliveries more predictable and reliable. The Minute negotiations are underway, and a team from the U.S. Section of the IBWC and Texas is seeking innovative solutions. Reflecting variable Rio Grande flows, the 1944 Treaty allows Mexico the flexibility to make up a deficit from one five-year cycle in the next one if the shortfall is due to drought. Negotiators are aiming to incentivize management strategies that can be deployed during a cycle, rather than waiting until the end of a water cycle to address any shortfall.

The IBWC believes “growing the pie” – expanding both countries’ water supplies – will help with treaty compliance. A White Paper (<https://bit.ly/3ZNLCNy>) written by a USIBWC contractor described stakeholder proposals to launch new water conservation projects in the Rio Grande basin, modeled on Colorado River basin projects. Colorado River successes include U.S. federal investments in Mexican water conservation in exchange for sharing the water savings. Future Rio Grande basin projects could comprise both conservation and new sources of water, such as desalination.

In the face of historic drought, the USIBWC works with a wide range of partners to access unprecedented resources. We continue to advocate with U.S. federal agencies to ensure the Rio Grande receives U.S. government infrastructure funds for drought resiliency. The United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) Regional Conservation Partnership Program is rolling out funding opportunities which will include Inflation Reduction Act funds. The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law allocates \$8.3 billion for water infrastructure projects over the next five years to advance drought resilience and expand access to clean water for families, farmers and wildlife.

The USIBWC is proud to partner with the State of Texas in consultations and negotiations with Mexican water officials. The USIBWC also meets frequently with Rio Grande Valley stakeholders and has organized funding workshops that show communities how to obtain assistance from USDA and the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

The USIBWC looks to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community opinion-makers for expertise and help building consensus. The USIBWC’s Rio Grande White Paper highlighted the Colorado River experience where NGOs and an Environmental Work Group developed community support, leading to a series of increasingly impactful Colorado River Minutes over a 15-year period. The IBWC has consulted with the Rio Grande Joint Venture, a group of over 50 U.S. and Mexican environmental organizations, about playing a similar role in Rio Grande talks.



*Pictured left: Meeting of the binational hydrology work group working on the model that will bring predictability and reliability to the Rio Grande.
Pictured right: IBWC Commissioners Resendez and Giner with CONAGUA executives.*



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U.S. Request for Immediate Mexican Reservoir Releases

Funding and science can help, but sharing scarce water also requires timely decisions on sensitive matters. Commissioner Giner has had multiple meetings with the leadership of Mexico’s National Water Commission and, with the support of the U.S. Department of State, has formally called on senior Mexican water managers to immediately release water from Mexican reservoirs in the Rio Grande basin, now that Texas farmers are planning this year’s crops. Key Mexican reservoirs are at or near conservation capacity, offering an opportunity to chip away at the current delivery shortfall. And the shortfall is fast nearing historic levels: as of April 29, Mexico’s Rio Grande water deliveries to the United States were more than 537,000 acre feet less than expected volumes. What’s more, immediate releases could actually help prevent flooding in Mexico. The USIBWC and the State Department pointed out the need to avoid unmanageable delivery deficits at the end of the five-year water cycle and emphasized that Mexico’s immediate release of water could pave the way for a successful Minute negotiation and future U.S. water conservation investment in Mexico.

While the IBWC leads negotiating efforts with numerous groups on both sides of the border, all of us can contribute experience, expertise and a cooperative spirit to solutions benefiting water users in both the United States and Mexico. The IBWC believes we are more effective working together than competing for water, an increasingly scarce resource in the Rio Grande basin.



Top: Rio Grande in Colorado Canyon, Big Bend Ranch State Park. Photo by Leslie Grijalva.
Bottom: Rio Grande River at Rio Bravo, TX. Photo by Leslie Grijalva