



International Boundary and Water Commission  
United States Section

For immediate release  
November 20, 2023

**AGENCY SEEKS PUBLIC COMMENT ON THE  
DRAFT ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT FOR  
MANAGEMENT OF FEDERAL GRAZING LEASES AT  
THE FALCON DAM AND RESERVOIR, TEXAS**

The United States Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) provides the Notice of Availability for and solicits public comment on a Draft Environmental Assessment (EA) and Finding of No Significant Impact for lease management activities at the Falcon Dam and Reservoir (i.e., Falcon Project), Starr and Zapata Counties, Texas. Federal lands associated with the Falcon Project have been utilized by the public for various activities, including grazing leases, since the Falcon Project was established. However, the economic value of these leases and the challenges to successful land management require a reevaluation of the grazing lease program. The Draft EA presents eight land management alternatives to grazing leases that address low grazing lease values and limited access by USIBWC to leased lands. The USIBWC has identified that one or any combination of the action alternatives could be implemented to manage the grazing lease program at the Falcon Project.

The USIBWC proposes to update or eliminate active and inactive grazing leases in use for commercial, residential, or recreational purposes on federal land in the Falcon Project. Rights-of-way (ROWs) for the Falcon Project totaled 63,192 acres on the U.S. side as of 2000. The grazing lease program has continued for areas along the Falcon Reservoir that were originally ranches and farms before the land was acquired by the federal government pursuant to the Water Treaty of 1944 between the U.S. and Mexico, with construction of the Falcon Project completed on October 19, 1953. The grazing lease program assured those areas not under water or flooded and owned by the federal government would be economically used as they were in the past by the local community. Initially leases allowed for agricultural uses in addition to grazing, but agricultural activities and any clearing of leased lands were later restricted to reduce potential impacts on cultural resources in accordance with National Historic

Preservation Act requirements. Active leases currently only allow grazing activities. This project will assist USIBWC in determining if grazing leases should be allowed or discontinued and/or whether land management alternatives should be established in lieu of grazing.

The EA evaluates alternatives for management of the grazing lease program on lands at the water-land interface below the 307-foot traverse taking line of the reservoir, with some ingress up to the 314-foot taking line with easements into and adjacent to private land. The grazing lease program includes the 159 active and inactive grazing leases originally issued in 1956.

USIBWC is considering the following alternatives to manage grazing leases on federal land at the Falcon Project:

#### No Action Alternative

There would be no change to the Falcon Project grazing lease program under the No Action Alternative. All grazing leases would be reviewed, and a determination made for each lease as to whether (1) it is still valid, (2) the lease has been properly renewed annually, (3) the proper annual rent charges have been applied, and (4) if the lease is not held by the original lessee, that the lease transfer was completed properly. No new leases would be issued under the No Action Alternative. The rent payment for leases would remain unchanged.

#### Terminate Leases

USIBWC would elect to terminate leases in accordance with the leases' termination clause and reduce or eliminate the grazing lease program at Falcon Reservoir. Once an active grazing lease is terminated, no lease renewals or issuance of new grazing lease for that parcel would occur, and those USIBWC-owned lands would not be used for any activities by private individuals or business entities.

#### Change Rental Rates on Active Leases and Implement Improved Program Management

Lessees would be charged a fair market value for grazing leases at the Falcon Project. Therefore, instead of setting a fixed annual value for leases based on a rental price per acre as in the past, leases would be made through an adequate advertisement for bids and awarded to the highest bidder. The fair market value for competitive grazing leases would be determined through the competitive bid process; however, awards would not be made for less than a predetermined minimum acceptable annual rent price, which would include USIBWC's determination of fair market value plus administrative costs. Competitive leases could be bid for

a period of five years with the accepted proposed rent charge being paid annually. At the end of each five-year lease period, leases would be opened again for competitive bids.

#### Allow Hunting on Existing Grazing Leases

Active leases would be modified to allow hunting, along with an approved set of hunting restrictions. Leases would stipulate that hunting would follow the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's approved hunting laws and regulations. No land modifications would be allowed to support hunting, and no land management activities such as vegetation removal would be allowed to support hunting activities.

#### Terminate Leases Not Directly Accessible from Public ROWs

USIBWC does not have access to many of its active grazing leases. This makes management of the leases and spot-checking of the activities of lessees on leased lands nearly impossible. USIBWC would elect to terminate only those leases not directly accessible from public ROWs in accordance with the leases' termination clause. Further, every accessible active grazing lease would be modified to include language concerning maintaining locks on gates that can be opened using USIBWC keys and maintaining ingress and egress routes to leases at all times, without impediment.

#### Negotiate Access Easements on Private Property for Existing Leases

For those grazing leases that are not accessible from public ROWs, USIBWC would contact private landowners to ascertain their interest in negotiating an access easement across their property from a public ROW or from another parcel of USIBWC-owned land to the grazing lease. If such an easement could be negotiated at a reasonable cost to the government, then access easements for private lands between public ROWs and leases would be negotiated and established.

#### Amend Leases to Allow Vegetation Management

USIBWC would amend leases to allow herbicide application and/or mechanical vegetation removal. As a vegetation management technique, prescribed burning was considered under this alternative, but determined to not be reasonable, as it would require lessees to manage all prescribed burns. Herbicide application would only be conducted by licensed applicators. Mechanical vegetation control would be limited to the use of hand tools, and no roots would be pulled or removed as part of the mechanical vegetation control activities.

## Form a Citizen's Committee to Provide Lease Management Support

USIBWC would form citizen's council to provide lease management support. The citizen's council would support lessees and USIBWC's management of the Falcon Project grazing lease program and be a conduit for communication and information exchange between USIBWC and lessees and local government officials.

The Draft EA includes analysis of the impacts that the alternatives for implementing the Proposed Action would have on the environment, including land use, biological resources, earth resources, water resources, cultural resources, recreational resources, and socioeconomics and Environmental Justice. The Draft EA is available on the USIBWC website at <https://www.ibwc.gov/reports-studies/eis-ea-public-comment/>. Physical copies of the Draft EA are available at the Joe A. Guerra Laredo Public Library, 1120 E. Calton Rd., Laredo, Texas 78041; the Olga V. Figueroa Zapata County Public Library, 901 Kennedy St., Zapata, Texas 78076; and the Roma Public Library, 1705 N. Athens St., Roma, Texas 78584. Public comments on this Draft EA are due by December 28, 2023, and can be submitted to Mr. Mark Howe, Cultural Resources Specialist, via email at [falconcomments@ibwc.gov](mailto:falconcomments@ibwc.gov), or via mail at International Boundary and Water Commission, 4191 N. Mesa Street, El Paso, TX 79902. Implementation of the selected alternative(s) will not begin until the Final EA is completed, and Finding of No Significant Impact is signed (if appropriate).

For more information, contact Mr. Mark Howe, Cultural Resources Specialist, via telephone at 915-832-4767 or via email at [falconcomments@ibwc.gov](mailto:falconcomments@ibwc.gov).

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