



International Boundary and Water Commission
United States Section

For immediate release
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USIBWC MARKS TENTH ANNIVERSARY OF HISTORIC IRRIGATION OF RIO GRANDE HABITAT RESTORATION SITE IN NEW MEXICO

The United States Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC) marks the 10th anniversary of the historic first irrigation of a habitat restoration site within the Rio Grande Canalization Project (RGCP).

The RGCP, which was constructed in the 1930s, covers 105 miles of the Rio Grande and its floodplain from Percha Dam near Arrey, N.M., downstream to American Dam in El Paso, TX. In June 2009, the USIBWC signed the Record of Decision (ROD) on River Management Alternatives for the RGCP. The ROD committed the USIBWC to continuing the agency's mission of water delivery, flood control, and maintaining flood capacity while implementing a variety of environmental enhancements. One such USIBWC project was to restore habitat on 550 acres and develop an environmental water transactions program (EWTP) to acquire or lease water rights for those habitat sites.

Over many years, the USIBWC collaborated with the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to establish a framework for the EWTP. In 2013, the EBID Board of Directors passed a policy allowing native trees to be considered agriculture. This paved the way for USIBWC to acquire water rights and use them for habitat restoration while being considered a constituent of the irrigation district, just like other farmers.

On June 30, 2014, the USIBWC irrigated the first habitat restoration site, the Leasburg Extension Lateral Wasteway #8 (LELWW8) site, in Las Cruces, N.M., and commemorated the historic event with an on-site ceremony, attended by Congressional delegations and representatives from EBID, USFWS and other stakeholders. Additionally, the landowners who sold their water rights to the USIBWC were invited and attended this inaugural ceremony.

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Since 2014, the USIBWC has acquired water rights for four additional habitat sites and has continued irrigating at all five sites. In June 2024, USIBWC crews conducted the 24th irrigation event at the LELWW8 site. Since 2011, the USIBWC has planted more than 120,000 native trees and shrubs on 22 habitat sites covering more than 500 acres.

“This is a landmark celebration and I certainly appreciate the cooperation and collaboration with IBWC, NM Audubon and EBID to see this project come to fruition. The environmental water transaction program was instrumental in developing this flourishing habitat site and I believe it to be instrumental in future habitat sites envisioned within the river corridor,” said EBID Manager Gary Esslinger.

“It’s great to see the trees and wildlife thriving a decade after we and our partners started this historic restoration program along the Rio Grande,” USIBWC Commissioner Dr. Maria-Elena Giner, P.E., said. “We are committed to the success of this project and will continue to irrigate these habitat sites and hopefully more in the future. We look forward to further cooperation with our federal and non-federal partners on this and other restoration efforts.”

USIBWC continues to implement its environmental water program and is interested in acquiring additional water rights for other habitat sites throughout southern New Mexico. If any landowner is interested in selling their EBID-administered water rights at market price to the U.S. Government, please consider reaching out to USIBWC. For more information, contact Ms. Elizabeth Verdecchia, Natural Resources Specialist, 915-832-4701 or elizabeth.verdecchia@ibwc.gov. Reports and studies related to the habitat restoration efforts over the past decade can be found on the USIBWC website at <https://www.ibwc.gov/reports-studies/rgcp/>.

Irrigation Anniversary – Press Release



Then-USIBWC Commissioner Ed Drusina spoke at a ceremony during the irrigation of the first habitat restoration site, June 30, 2014



Native cottonwood and willow trees during the first irrigation, June 30, 2014 (left), and during the 24th irrigation on June 10, 2024 (right)

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