

LOWER RIO GRANDE CITIZENS FORUM
July 18, 2012
International Boundary and Water Commission
Lower Rio Grande Field Office
Mercedes, TX
*Meeting Notes

Board Members in attendance:

Donnie Valdez
John Goolsby
Carl Boyd
Salvador Alemany
John Wood
Julia Jorgensen
Bill Lewis
Hudson DeYoe
Louie Sanchez
Patty Alexander

Members of the public in attendance:

Piro Alejandro Diaz Puente, Mexican Section, International Boundary and Water Commission
Alfonso Carmona, Mexican Section, International Boundary and Water Commission
Joe Tucker
Sarah bishop Merill, Sierra Club Water Committee
Ronnie Ramirez, TSSWCB
Paul Creran
Ken King, Valley Nature Center
Rene and Esther Peynado
Ernesto Reyes, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ann Cass, Proyecto Azteca/Equal Voice
Gerardo Crespi, U.S. Border Patrol
Corina Argullin, L & G Engineering
Alonzo Vega, U.S. Border Patrol
Troy Allen, Delta Lake Irrigation District
Oscar D. Montoya, Hidalgo County E.M.C.
Scott Nicol, Sierra Club
Olivia Doerge Mena, London School of Economics
Maxwell Pons, The Nature Conservancy
Kim Wehl, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Enrique Cadena, U.S. Border Patrol
Jaime Flores, TWRI
Claudia Lozano, Texas Commission on Environmental Quality
Jaime Sanchez, U.S. Border Patrol

Members of the media in attendance:

Univision, Telemundo, News Channel 4, News Channel 5, La Feria News, Rio Grande Guardian, and the McAllen Monitor.

Update on Border Wall Segments O-1, O-2, and O-3

Mr. Montero made a brief statement in reference to the Border Wall segments O-1, O-2, and O-3. Mr. Montero stated that the specific subject had been addressed in the previous Citizens Forum Meeting by Commissioner Drusina and Mr. Gabriel Duran. Mr. Montero stated that any comments concerning the border wall would be addressed during the public comment period at the end of the scheduled presentations.

Potential for Biological Control of Giant Reed

Dr. John Goolsby, Research Entomologist, United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), introduced himself and briefly explained the program the USDA has implemented to control the invasive Giant Reed which has a dire effect on the entire Rio Grande Basin in the U.S. and Mexico. The plant originated from Spain and was introduced to the Rio Grande Basin back in the late 1500s. Dr. Goolsby showed the impact the plant has had on the river and tributary rivers. He explained that the plant does not produce any seeds, it is entirely clonal but it can spread everywhere by floating down rivers and in earth-moving equipment. There are lots of problems this plant causes like national security and animal health. In reference to national security, it reduces visibility over the river for Border Patrol Agents on the ground. The cattle fever tick could reinvade the US and cause severe problems. The giant reed (carrizo cane) along the river enables the invasion of the cattle fever tick because it creates an environment that is cool and shady. Very few insects live on the leaves of the carrizo cane so the tick falls on the animals and they go virtually uneaten by natural predators that would be living there. It also causes problems like channelization along the river. It creates walls known by ecologists as embankments which cause the river to flow very fast creating channels and undercutting banks, completely changing the way the water flows. Currently they are using the Arundo Wasp and the Arundo Scale in Del Rio, TX as biological control. These insects are specialized to only feed on the carrizo cane. Dr. Goolsby utilized PowerPoint slides as part of his presentation.

Public- The wasps, are they sterile?

Dr. John Goolsby- No, they are not sterile but they are all female. The idea is that females give rise to more females. They are free living. Once they are established in an area, they do not need to be released any more.

Public- How long is their life cycle?

Dr. John Goolsby- 1 month in the summer time. They love heat and humidity. If you go further West like Del Rio the life cycle might take 2 to 3 months.

Public- Will you be only concentrating on the River or will you be going to the irrigation canals? We live next to an irrigation canal and that plant is getting into the canal.

Dr. John Goolsby- It is a big problem along the irrigation canals. Part of our plan is to eventually release everywhere. We feel we need to focus on the Rio Grande because the

problem is so severe. We lose so much water there that we should first solve the problem there and then take on other places where it is causing problems.

Public- Is the long term outcome mitigation or eradication?

Dr. John Goolsby- Mitigation would be the one because the plant will always be here. If we can stunt it, reduce its growth rate then the native vegetation will be more competitive. We have proven experimentally that if you can stunt the plant the native vegetation is right there ready to return. It cannot return until the dominance of the plant is reduced.

Public- Do we have native predators that would feed on these insects to prevent any sort of population?

Dr. John Goolsby- Once the insects build up, you will probably never see them because they are virtually invisible. They eventually drive the population of the plant down, their population drives down as well. They follow the population of the plant. Other insects could eat them, like spiders and things like that, but generally they are undetected by humans and the environment unless you know what you are looking for.

Public- You said they are rearing them down in Mexico also?

Dr. John Goolsby- Yes, in Cuernavaca, Mexico. There is a branch of the Mexican Government called IMTA which is kind of like the Bureau of Reclamation. They have a bio control unit just like we do in the United States. So we have transferred the insects to IMTA where they are rearing them for release.

Public- It would appear that there would be a concern that they would get out of hand. Is there a way to control them?

Dr. John Goolsby- They don't get out of hand. They only feed on that specific plant. Like the boll weevil only feeds on cotton and monarchs only feed on milk weeds, they are finely in tune with that plant. Even at super high density, you really have to know what you are looking for to find them. They can't just decide to feed on sugar cane or anything. We would have to test that experimentally and also we have 100s of years of data from where they are native. They feed specifically to that species. We have to get approval from Canada, US, and Mexico to be able to release. We have to all be in agreement.

Public- If we were to have riparian forests, will the insects behave differently?

Dr. John Goolsby- Once we have the native riparian trees grow back and over the top of the cane, it is a much weaker plant. The tree regeneration is just as important as the insects attacking the plants. The two work together to achieve the final result. Once the cane gets established the native plants cannot grow.

Public- Once the wasp stunts that plant, does that plant eventually die or does it stay there?

Dr. John Goolsby- It still dies. It takes time for the plant to weaken. The plant may still be alive for a long period of time but once it loses its vigor then the native plants have a chance to re-grow again.

Salt Cedar Establishment in the Lower Rio Grande

Kim Wahl, Plant Ecologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, briefly explained what is being seen at the riparian areas with the salt cedar. Since 2010 there has been a large influx of salt cedar establishing in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. There are multiple species of salt cedar but they all fall under the Genus Tamarix. They rapidly colonize, outcompete native vegetation,

degrade native wildlife habitat, provide little food value for native wildlife species, increase salinity of surface soil, decrease water table, and reduce stream flow. Salt Cedar tends to hinder access for border protection personnel and for recreation. Salt Cedar was introduced as an ornamental shrub in the eastern U.S. and was planted to reduce soil loss in the southwestern U.S. They are mostly used as a shade and windbreak tree.

Public- What have you found to be successful in the removal?

Kim Wahl- We started with mechanical removal, just hand pulling. That is 100% effective. You remove the entire root. But you can only do that with trees until they are up to 3 feet tall. Then you can't remove the root from the ground any more. After that, we have gone back in with cut stump treatments. We are finding that individual treatments per plant along with the drought is helping. One of the problems with cutting the stump is when you lay one of these trees onto the ground, it can re-root. Fortunately with the drought we have had the ability to cut them down and leave them laying without them re-rooting because they dry out too quickly. We found that if they are cut and treated properly, it is 100% effective. However, if they are not cut and treated properly then the effectiveness goes down.

Public-For you to treat and remove the salt cedar, what type of restoration are you practicing and how effective has it been?

Kim Wahl- Right now we are just doing passive restoration. All of these areas have only had the salt cedar for 2 years. We remove the salt cedar and the native brush is filling back in on its own. That's what we are able to do right now. Several years from now we will have to go in and replant those areas from where we have removed the salt cedar. With the passive restoration it has been very effective. Everything that was there before the flood is coming back in.

Rodolfo Montero - We are having problems in the floodplain where we have a lot of salt cedar. We are going to be using their experience and their methods which is cutting the stump and using herbicide. Because of their work and experience, we will be working together trying to get rid of the problem.

Public- Are you using pesticide?

Kim Wahl- We have used foliar herbicides and they are very effective. We have tried it with Habitat or Imazapyr and we have also tried it with Imazamox. We have also tried some areas with Triclopyr. All of them have been effective. We are staying away from that for the most part because we have to do it with backpack sprayers and the areas we are having to go into are filled with dead trees and snags that we can't work around. If I remember correctly, we are using non-ionic surfactant. The one we have right now is called Activator 90. Right now we are working in areas that are not right on water. Where we have done some foliar sprays, we are right on the water, but all the other areas are right on the upper bank. On the lower banks there isn't as much salt cedar. That stayed flooded longer and those trees died out.

Update of the Arroyo Colorado Flood Control Enhancement Project in the Harlingen Area

Rodolfo Montero, Area Operations Manager, USIBWC, explained the progress being made at the Arroyo Colorado. During the 2010 flood, there was 25% of the design flow in the floodway and water was a foot away from going into the streets. The amount of vegetation and brush is such that it slows it down. The water will still flow but it will go higher to compensate. If it jumps the banks, it may flood the communities. We have been working with

the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the environmental community to find the best way to minimize the effect. We are focusing on a three-phase solution to maintain the Arroyo Colorado.

Public- What's the possibility of getting the work done in what I would call the offseason?

Rodolfo Montero- We have limited resources. Right now we have a budget issue and we do depend on the budget. We have to be sensitive with the environmental communities so we don't just want to go in there and get rid of everything. We could put heavy equipment but it is the last thing we want to do. So because it is a slow process and it is done by hand, it does take some time.

Public- How many miles are involved here?

Rodolfo Montero- We think it is about 3 miles.

Public- What about a hydrologic study to show the effect of vegetation on flood flows?

Rodolfo Montero- The hydrologic study is going to give us current conditions. In it is included all the equations regarding the amount of vegetation that is in there.

Joe Tucker- The Mercedes Office of the IBWC used to have 66 employees but now it only has 43. Mr. Montero is currently working with less able bodies in order to maintain the levees.

Rodolfo Montero- We had a rain event this year where McAllen flooded. We let all the water go to the Arroyo to avoid flooding the North Floodway. Flooding the North Floodway would cause all the structures that drain into the north floodway from the north communities to be closed. They would not be able to drain creating a big problem. In a small scenario flooding, all the water goes into the Arroyo because it is a natural channel to avoid that problem. The North Floodway is also being considered as a way to avoid putting more water in the Arroyo Colorado but it is a lot of miles and it will be costly. The option is on the table.

Public- Is carrizo cane present in the Arroyo? Are you also eradicating it?

Rodolfo Montero- Carrizo cane is all over the place. No, we are not eradicating it.

Public- Thank you for your careful work and protecting the citizens of Harlingen. We also go out there and clean around the Arroyo.

Public- Are you considering placing concrete like the City of Harlingen did?

Rodolfo Montero- No, we are not considering concrete.

Public- Have you ever considered utilizing volunteers to assist with the clean up?

Rodolfo Montero- If you know of any we would be happy to share the load. If anyone has any ideas as to how to start the program, we will make it happen.

Analysis of Fresh Water Inflows to Coastal Environments

Hudson DeYoe, Director of Center for Subtropical Studies, introduced himself and gave a basic overview of the analysis of fresh water inflows to the coastal environments. Dr. DeYoe referenced Texas Senate Bill 3 which mandates establishment of environmental flow recommendations for the coastal waterways and rivers that feed into the coast. The effort was started March 2011 here in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The report will be completed within a week and will be accessible online.

Public- Are you looking into reestablishing some of the sea grasses by planting them?

Hudson DeYoe- Not yet. We just finished another sea grass survey last week of the entire bay and we haven't done a comparison survey with the 2011 survey. There is a lot of sea grass that is still missing. To be effective it would be a massive type of restoration program that would cost multi millions of dollars. Eventually the system will find its own way back but there are no plans to do any replanting.

Public Comment

Scott Nicol, Sierra Club- Recently it has been brought to our attention that in February the IBWC approved border walls in Roma, Rio Grande City and Los Ebanos that had previously been disallowed for years. Up until recently there was concern that building the wall in the floodplain, where there are no IBWC levees, would deflect water into Mexico or dam it up on the US side and that is why IBWC had not allowed it. For at least 2 years Customs and Border Protection applied pressure in Washington, DC for IBWC to back them unilaterally without Mexican permission. There were a number of CBP-sponsored reports that claimed that walls put on the floodplain would not cause any deflection or any significant collection. Those studies show the wall diverting water into Roma, Rio Grande City, and Los Ebanos . The Sierra Club is very concerned about both the communities there and the wildlife refuge there. We are also particularly concerned that IBWC has not been forthcoming with this information. IBWC has not, as far as I know, informed any of the local landowners or stakeholders about this. CBP has not informed anybody and we have no idea if construction is starting tomorrow or two years from now. First off I would like to encourage IBWC to come back to its original position and reject these walls because they are going to cause a tremendous amount of damage if they are erected and there is significant flooding in the Rio Grande. I would also like to encourage the IBWC and CBP to be a lot more forthcoming with this information and that they have meetings like this to discuss these issues. I have been asking IBWC to put on the agenda for one of these citizens forums for about a year now and so far nothing. I would like to ask you, is that going to happen?

Rodolfo Montero- We did have it actually in the last meeting. We did discuss this. The Commissioner came here and an expert from the Engineering Planning Department did come here and we did discuss just that. Another comment is that we don't build the wall, DHS does. So any comments regarding the wall and the purpose of it has to be directed to DHS. Regarding the approval/disapproval, DHS had to prove to us that the wall would not deflect water. We used the latest model FLO-2D, a 2 dimensional model which is the most advanced, and models the fence as a permeable structure with bars. The model the Mexican Section used is a solid wall instead of the permeable fence and that made the difference. So when we used the FLO-2D model, which is the most advanced and most accurate, with the permeable fence it did not show deflection that required to reject it as per the Treaty in 1970. We can bring in our experts to discuss this in more detail.

Louie Sanchez- Who is responsible for notifying land owners? Are there any potential treaty violations? Who is in charge of design?

Rodolfo Montero- In this case it would be the proponent which is DHS. The US has found that we do meet the criteria established in the 1970 Treaty so we are not breaking the treaty.

Scott Nichols- The problem is debris forming because that is what is happening in Arizona where there was a big flooding event in 2008 where in the City of Nogales the water was dammed so it was six feet deep on both sides. If it's crystal clear water and it's going to flow right through just fine but you have a hurricane who is washing trees and other debris in there and it's going to block it.

John Wood- I think the border wall is obviously a thorn in everybody's side. As the city commissioner at the time the border wall was built, I was the only one who opposed it. The issues you have and what Mr. Montero has been saying are issues that someone else needs to answer besides him, someone who has more expertise in the subject. The idea of setting up the meeting as it was suggested and getting the experts down here is the best way to address the situation.

Suggested Future Agenda Items:

1. Border Wall (O-1, O-2, & O-3)
2. Eco Tourism
3. Hydrologic Study at Arroyo Colorado
4. Bureau of Reclamation (climate change in the Rio Grande)

If there are other issues/projects you would like to hear, please email the Lower Rio Grande Field Office at Rodolfo.montero@ibwc.gov or sally.spener@ibwc.gov

*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.