

RECORD OF DECISION
FOR THE
FINAL PROGRAMMATIC ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR
LONG-TERM IMPROVEMENTS TO THE USIBWC RIO GRANDE FLOOD
CONTROL PROJECTS
ALONG THE TEXAS-MEXICO BORDER

Approved by:



Carlos Marin, P.E.
Commissioner, United States Section
International Boundary and Water Commission

Date 2/25/08

**INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY AND WATER COMMISSION
UNITED STATES AND MEXICO
UNITED STATES SECTION**

Final Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for Long-term Improvements to the USIBWC Rio Grande Flood Control Projects along the Texas-Mexico Border.

AGENCY: United States Section, International Boundary and Water Commission (USIBWC)

ACTION: Issuance of Record of Decision

SUMMARY

This notice is provided in accordance with 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) parts 1500-1508 of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and USIBWC procedures for implementing NEPA. The USIBWC anticipates the need to improve functionality of three flood control projects located in the Rio Grande along the Texas-Mexico border. Potential improvement measures are mainly associated with the project core mission of flood protection, boundary stabilization, and water delivery. Additional measures under consideration are intended to improve water use, quality, and conservation, as well as measures supporting local or regional initiatives for multipurpose use of the projects for wildlife habitat development, and improved environmental conditions.

A Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement (PEIS) was prepared to evaluate potential consequences of three action alternatives under consideration for long-term improvement of the flood control projects. The USIBWC will apply the programmatic evaluation as an overall guidance for future evaluations of individual projects, including both those currently envisioned at a conceptual level and those whose implementation is not currently anticipated but would be possible within a 20-year timeframe.

The Multipurpose Project Management Alternative was adopted among the three action alternatives as the preferred option for long-term improvements to the Rio Grande flood control projects. In implementing the preferred alternative, the USIBWC will continue to improve functionality of the flood control projects to meet its mandate for flood control, water delivery, and boundary stabilization, while supporting initiatives for improvement of environmental conditions and water resources utilization.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Mr. Daniel Borunda, Environmental Protection Specialist, Environmental Management Division, USIBWC, 4171 North Mesa Street, C-100, El Paso, Texas 79902 or e-mail: danielborunda@ibwc.state.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Background

The USIBWC anticipates the need to improve capabilities or functionality of three flood control projects (FCP) located in the Rio Grande along the Texas-Mexico border: The

Rectification FCP, extending 84.4 miles along the Rio Grande, downstream from American Diversion Dam in El Paso to Fort Quitman, Texas; the Presidio-Ojinaga FCP extending over 13.1 river miles of the Rio Grande near Presidio, Texas; and the Lower Rio Grande FCP that extends 186 river miles on the Rio Grande, from Peñitas, Texas to the Gulf of Mexico, and includes 120 miles of interior floodways. These projects were constructed to provide flood protection in urban, suburban, and agricultural areas in the United States and Mexico, facilitate water delivery, and stabilize the international river boundary.

Measures identified for potential implementation were organized into three action alternatives focusing on improvements in operation and maintenance (O&M) practices and project functionality; improvements in water quality and water utilization; and additional measures for multipurpose use of the projects beyond their core mission of flood control, water delivery and boundary preservation. Multipurpose use would include regional initiatives for improvement of habitat and environmental conditions proposed by federal agencies, local governments, and other organizations.

The USIBWC prepared a Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement, in cooperation with the United States Bureau of Reclamation, United States Fish and Wildlife Service, and United States Army Corps of Engineers, to analyze potential effects of three action alternatives for improvement of the three Rio Grande FCPs. The programmatic evaluation will be used as an overall guidance for evaluation of future improvement projects, both those already identified at a conceptual level or those whose implementation is possible within a 20-year timeframe. Once an improvement project is developed for implementation, site-specific environmental documentation will be prepared on the basis of PEIS findings and project specifications.

A Draft PEIS was released for a 45-day public review period on August 10, 2007. Nineteen responses were received during the review period, ten from regulatory agencies, six from various organizations, and three from individual reviewers. Oral comments were also received from 12 presenters during public hearings held in the Cities of El Paso, Presidio, and McAllen, Texas on August 21, 22 and 28, 2007, respectively. The Notice of Availability of the Final PEIS was published in the Federal Register on January 8, 2008.

Alternatives Considered in the Final PEIS

Three action alternatives, developed with public review and involvement, and a No-Action Alternative were evaluated in the PEIS. The *No Action Alternative* is the continuation of current O&M practices, including actions planned or identified for short-term implementation.

The *Enhanced Operation and Maintenance Alternative* (EOM Alternative) addresses anticipated or likely improvements to the projects' core mission of flood control, water delivery, and boundary preservation beyond those to be implemented under current O&M practices. Measures under consideration as part of the EOM Alternative include changes of the levee system, floodway management, stream channel maintenance, and sediment disposal.

The *Integrated Water Resources Management Alternative* (IWR Alternative) includes those measures identified under the EOM Alternative for improved flood control and water delivery as well as measures intended to improve water quality, water use, and water conservation. While improvement in water resources utilization is not a goal inherently associated with the flood control project mission, it reflects strategic goals adopted by the USIBWC as an integral part of enhanced project functionality.

The *Multipurpose Project Management Alternative* (MPM Alternative) incorporates measures under consideration under the EOM and IWR Alternatives, plus measures for multiple use of the floodway and environmental improvement initiatives. Those measures include changes in floodway vegetation management for habitat development, as well as regional environmental initiatives that would be implemented and managed by other agencies or organizations, and supported through cooperative agreements.

USIBWC Decision

As discussed in detail in the Final PEIS, the MPM Alternative was selected by the USIBWC as the preferred option for future improvements to three Rio Grande flood control projects. The MPM Alternative was also identified as the environmentally preferred alternative. The USIBWC decision was made after carefully weighing technical and socioeconomic considerations, as well as potentially significant environmental effects analyzed in the PEIS.

In implementing the MPM Alternative, the USIBWC will continue to improve functionality and maintenance of the Rio Grande FCPs to meet its mandate for flood control, water delivery, and boundary stabilization, while supporting initiatives for improved utilization of water resources and environmental conditions. The USIBWC will apply the programmatic evaluation as an overall guidance for evaluation of future improvement projects, either already identified at a conceptual level or those whose implementation is not currently anticipated but would be possible within a 20-year timeframe. Once an improvement project is developed for implementation, site-specific environmental documentation will be prepared on the basis of PEIS findings and project specifications.

Basis for Decision and Issues Evaluated

In selecting the MPM Alternative for implementation, the USIBWC considered potential environmental consequences identified in the PEIS, as well as the potential of the various alternatives to meet the project's core objectives of flood control, water delivery, and boundary preservation. The decision-making process also took into consideration comments and concerns of agencies, individuals, and public and private organizations. Potentially significant environmental consequences were identified in the areas of water resources, biological resources, and cultural resources. The selected alternative would have limited impacts on socioeconomic resources, land use, and environmental health (noise, air quality, environmental hazards), and those impacts would be short-term, temporary impacts that would occur mostly during construction.

Water Resources. Due to the increase in flood containment capacity to control severe floods, long-term benefits are anticipated for implementation of the MPM Alternative, as well as the EOM Alternative and IWR Alternative. Without those improvements, the Rectification FCP, Presidio FCP and Lower Rio Grande FCP would not provide sufficient protection of life and property under severe flood conditions. Improvements in water quality and water resources utilization are expected for measures associated with both the MPM Alternative and the IWR Alternative.

Biological Resources. Under the MPM Alternative, regional habitat conservation initiatives outside the levee corridor would provide additional habitat for native plant species and wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. Aquatic ecosystem improvements are also expected as a result of changes in sediment management and new habitat development. Under the IWR Alternative, benefits on biological resources would be more limited and primarily confined to the floodway under USIBWC jurisdiction. Those benefits would be associated with improved management of invasive plant species and habitat development within the floodway. Little or no improvements in terms of vegetation, wildlife habitat, or aquatic ecosystems are expected from implementation of the EOM Alternative.

Cultural Resources. Potential impacts on historic and archaeological resources are possible for all action alternatives, including the MPM Alternative. The extent and magnitude of potential impacts would be site-specific for each individual project, and primarily associated with construction activities. No significant differences in potential impacts were identified for implementation of the EOM and IWR Alternatives relative to the MPM Alternative.

Finding. Because of its potential to improve flood control and water resources management, as well as a greater potential for improvement of biological resources and environmental conditions, the MPM Alternative was identified as the preferred option for long-term improvements to the Rectification FCP, Presidio FCP, and Lower Rio Grande FCP. In implementing this alternative, the USIBWC will continue to improve functionality and maintenance of the three Rio Grande flood control projects while supporting initiatives for improvements in environmental conditions and utilization of water resources.