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Coping with Scarcity on the Río Grande/Río Bravo

The Bureau of Reclamation (Reclamation), of the United States Department of Interior, has an important effect on water resources in the United States, as well as internationally. The mission of Reclamation is to manage and protect water and related resources in an environmentally and economically sound manner. In effecting this mission and fostering a balanced approach to stewardship of natural resources, Reclamation works in close partnership with the public and other federal and state natural resource management agencies to provide for the efficient and effective use of water and related resources.

Reclamation is the largest wholesale supplier of water in the United States. It is also the country's sixth largest electric power generator. As such, Reclamation manages a system made up of multipurpose water resource project facilities that include 355 storage reservoirs, about 70,000 miles of canals and other water conveyance and distribution facilities, and 52 hydroelectric power plants.

The mass of this infrastructure lies in the western United States, an area experiencing critical changes in the demand for water resources. Due to a relatively low annual rainfall, this area is extremely susceptible to the disastrous effects of drought. We were recently reminded of this basic fact by the drought that gripped the northern Mexican States of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. The Southwest and southern Great Plains of the United States were impacted by drought as recently as 1996. Because of the ever-present danger of drought and the devastating effects drought brings, it is essential that a drought mitigation plan be developed to enable quick responses in drought situations.

The Río Grande/Río Bravo Basin has historically supported the needs of significant agricultural and urban population centers including the San Luis Valley of the southern and the middle Río Grande. The economic base of this area, and others where Reclamation operates projects, has historically been tied principally to irrigated agriculture. These areas, however, are now experiencing rapid population growth and increasing competition for water resources. Currently the Río Grande/Río Bravo watershed supports a population in excess of 4.1 million people, in addition to 3.8 million acres of irrigated land. Because of this strain on the river system, there is a great potential for disaster should a long-term drought lower reservoir and groundwater levels. In response to this danger, Reclamation is pro-actively exploring opportunities and is engaged

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in the integration of innovative technologies that focus on a balanced approach to meet water needs with greater environmental sensitivity.

The efforts of Reclamation, however, are complicated by the reality that the issues on the Río Grande/Río Bravo are transboundary in nature. The Río Grande border towns are all rapidly growing urban areas that are struggling to keep up with potable water and water treatment demands. The El Paso, Texas–Juárez, Mexico area, alone, is projected to have a population of nearly 3.3 million by the year 2020, making it the largest population center in the region.

Already, there is considerable competition for water resources between agricultural, municipal, and industrial demands. Meeting future demands resulting from continued population growth and development may lead to a need for a more intense level of shared binational management of transboundary resources including groundwater. This will have important effects on Reclamation's management in the upper regions of the Río Grande water system.

Reclamation already has the responsibility of operating large federal water projects on the Upper Río Grande while also coordinating border issues with the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC). International treaties with Mexico as well as interstate compacts among various states bind the management and operation of these projects. This makes Reclamation an indispensable party as it relates to decisions regarding changes in existing operations and/or proposed new development of resources along the border.

The challenges facing the Bureau of Reclamation and its shared management partners are to satisfy traditional water users while accommodating the new emerging demands upon the river system. Unlike the difficulty Reclamation faces in other parts of the American West, where such traditional uses date back only about 100 years, on the Río Grande they date back centuries. Fortunately, we have been able to satisfy these demands through the development of interstate compacts between Colorado, New Mexico and Texas coupled with a Treaty with the Republic of Mexico, as well as by construction of storage and delivery systems.

In addition to these traditional demands on the management partners, river managers in both countries are now faced with other nontraditional supply and use demands. Native Americans are now exercising and quantifying their water rights. Satisfaction of environmental values has also become a priority. Meanwhile, the population along the Río Grande/Río Bravo continues to grow at an alarming rate. These new, nontraditional demands increase the difficulty of effective, efficient river management along this already strained river system.

Given the nature of the river system, continued dialogue within the United States and Mexico's respective IBWC offices, and with Reclamation, is critical to water management of the Río Grande/Río Bravo if we are to

meet treaty obligations of both nations. Reclamation fully supports the work of the IBWC and looks to them as the principal party for resolution of any differences that may arise in the course of managing the river system along the U.S.–Mexico border. Such cooperation is especially critical during periods of severe drought.

Cooperation and improved management of the existing resources are the only viable management solutions to the ever-increasing demands along the Río Grande/Río Bravo river system. Reclamation, because of its long relationship with most, if not all, of the members of the water management community, coupled with its legal interest in many aspects of water management, is uniquely positioned to assist in leading the process into the next century.

For its part, Reclamation is actively working to help alleviate the devastating effects of both flood and drought. Reclamation provided flood control benefits amounting to \$414 million in 1995 and even more in 1996. It also provided \$2.2 million in 1997 for drought assistance to five western states for “on the ground” emergency drought relief, as well as for drought contingency planning.

Reclamation's drought authority also allows for it to assist state, local, and tribal governments beyond the traditional 17 western “Reclamation” states. It has done this by forging a partnership with the Western Governors' Association. These efforts have led to a positive effect of “pooling resources” among various levels of governments in the United States, resulting in a growth in funds available for flood and drought management. This has taken place in the face of drastic declines in government budgets and staff resources.

Recently, Reclamation hosted a series of Drought Mitigation Planning workshops in the western United States. The workshops brought together eight Native American tribes, several municipalities and water districts, irrigators, and federal and state agencies in charge of emergency water management, water management, and natural resources. It is encouraging to see that all of these groups are able to share their talents and recognize the interconnectedness of their disciplines, as well as work together to prepare for the onslaught of drought conditions.

Reclamation has moved beyond its traditional focus on the 17 western states. As government budgets and staffing resources decrease, it is incumbent upon all concerned to pool resources, move beyond their boundaries, and help address water management problems wherever they can. Flood and drought management has not been an area in which Reclamation has traditionally been heavily involved. However, with the increasingly cooperative government approach to problem-solving, Reclamation has realized its place in the process of working with affected entities to implement measures to prepare for future drought emergencies.