

**LOWER RIO GRANDE CITIZENS' FORUM MINUTES**  
**USIBWC Field Office**  
**Mercedes, TX**  
**July 16, 2008**  
**\*Tentative Meeting Notes**

Welcome and Introductions by Citizens' Forum Chair Patrick J. Daize

Board Members in Attendance

Carl A. Boyd  
Dr. Joseph Coulter  
Laura de la Garza  
Glenn Jarvis  
William R. Lewis  
Bradly Nibert  
Philip D. Waldron  
Kika de la Garza

Board Members Absent

Edward J. Vela  
Jose L. Muñoz  
Mary Lou Campbell

USIBWC Staff in Attendance

Al Riera  
Patrick Daize  
MaryAnn Rivera  
Belinda Ibarra  
Ricardo Montemayor  
Joel Saldivar  
Francisco Martinez

Members of the Public in Attendance

Chris Sherman, Associated Press  
Jim Duty, Malcolm Pirney, Env. Engineers  
William Keltner, La Feria News  
John Wood, Commissioner - Cameron County Pct. 2  
Jimmie Hutchinson, Citizen  
John Trevino, Citizen  
Troy Allen, Delta Lake Irrigation

## Natural Disasters and the Environment along the U.S.-Mexico Border, 11<sup>th</sup> Report of the Good Neighbor Environmental Board (GNEB)

After introductions, Citizens' Forum Co-Chair Patrick Daize gave a brief introduction of John Wood, a Cameron County Commissioner who serves on the Good Neighbor Environmental Board, and invited him to present his PowerPoint presentation.

Commissioner John Wood began his presentation by giving background information about the Good Neighbor Environmental Board (GNEB), including GNEB's mission to advise the U.S. President and Congress on good neighbor practices along the U.S. border with Mexico. Its recommendations focus on environmental infrastructure needs in U.S. border states. The GNEB includes representatives from federal agencies, the U.S. border states, and other individuals with expertise on border environmental issues. The GNEB's recommendations are published in annual reports. He described the U.S.-Mexico border region in terms of demographics, geography, economics, and the sister cities.

The GNEB's 10<sup>th</sup> Report, "Environmental Protection and Border Security on the U.S.-Mexico Border," was published in 2007. It discussed how to address problems associated with unauthorized flows of people across rural areas of the U.S.-Mexico border and continue to protect the environmental quality of the region.

Commissioner Wood then discussed the border security infrastructure currently in place and the environmental impact of undocumented crossings and of the infrastructure itself.

The GNEB recommendations included:

- Strengthen communication and collaboration between security agencies and environmental protection agencies, including land management agencies, on both sides of the border.
- Strategically employ a mix of technology and personnel to meet the security and environmental needs of different sections of the border region.

The 10<sup>th</sup> Report also addressed Hazardous Materials Crossings in terms of how to provide safety and security at ports of entry and beyond as well as environmental protection from risks associated with the transborder flow of hazardous materials. The report addressed such things as emergency response.

GNEB recommendations included:

- At ports of entry, increase the number of hazmat inspectors and establish specific sites and hours for hazardous materials vehicles.
- Beyond ports of entry, resolve liability issues for cross-border communities within the larger national strategic plan.

Commissioner Wood then discussed the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, "Natural Disasters and the Environment along the U.S. - Mexico Border," which was published in 2008. He discussed:

- a. Effects of Natural Disasters on the environment, human health, wildlife/ecosystems

- b. Managing Natural Disasters
- c. Spotlight on Promising Partnerships

GNEB 11<sup>th</sup> Report Recommendations include:

- a. Prevent or minimize the impacts of natural disasters through appropriate zoning codes, building codes, landscape requirements, watershed management, and municipal strategic planning.
- b. Build capacity at the local, state, regional, and tribal levels to effectively manage natural disasters, including cross-border coordination.
- c. Better integrate current disparate preparedness and response management systems and practical exercises so as to cover all types of emergencies, including natural disasters.
- d. Expand existing domestic and binational agreements

Before ending his presentation, Commissioner Wood referenced the topic for the 12<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, “Innovative Approaches, Including Incentives, to Reduce Pollution.” He stated there were 28 different proposed case studies that were to be narrowed down to five. He also stated that TCEQ case studies were included such as the restoration of the Bahía Grande. He then opened the floor to questions.

Forum member Laura De La Garza suggested a recommendation item for consideration on the next study. She recommended studying wetlands on both sides of the border for treating and helping to remove pollution. She stated that she had already communicated with Reynosa and they are all for working toward a solution.

Response: Commissioner Wood advised that they had a similar item that was in place.

Question: How do you go about soliciting input to GNEB? Do you have a staff developing the agenda?

Response: The GNEB has broad expertise onboard, it has several professors providing studies and histories. We also have staff in Washington, DC in EPA, which is the designated office. Further stating that all federal agencies involved with GNEB worked cooperatively for end results.

Question: What kind of funding do you have and where does it come from?

Response: Funding comes from EPA.

Question: Is there anybody that can foster support in form of a Master Plan?

Response: GNEB has addressed it in a report but it has not happened yet.

With no further questions or comments, Commissioner Wood ended his presentation.

Levee Raising Status Report

USIBWC Area Operations Manager and Forum Chair Patrick Daize began his presentation on the above topic.

Mr. Patrick Daize explained that the USIBWC crews had processed and completed approximately 9.1 miles of levee rehab and stated that out of those 9.1 miles, 1.2 miles were completed between Milpa Verde Road and Sabal Palms. He then gave a description of the completed areas, stating that 10 employees assisted with 11 pieces of equipment. Further, informed that 62,798.46 tons of material had been delivered and processed which included compaction testing and sub-grading.

He concluded in saying that out of the 19.6 miles of river levee programmed to be raised in-house, 47.15% had been raised and brought to the correct elevation and an additional 2.1 miles of area had been processed but would not be tested until July 18, 2008.

After his slide presentation, he opened the floor to questions.

Question: What is the next phase?

Response: Brownsville to Hidalgo began from Sabal Palms then they will continue 2 ½ miles from the Cameron County line to Rio Rico Road in Hidalgo County.

Question: When do they expect to complete the work?

Principal Engineer Al Riera stated that they were expected to complete the Cameron County to Hidalgo County phase by the end of September.

Question: What type of fill material is used and what type of criteria is used?

Response: The contractor follows specifications put forth from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and complies with FEMA standards.

Question: What is the status of the proposed removable fence at Los Ebanos?

Response: The only place where the removable fence would be located is in the floodplain. Evaluation of hydraulics is underway to see if it would have a negative impact on the 1970 Treaty, which prohibits construction that would cause an obstruction or deflection of the normal or flood flows of the Rio Grande. Both U.S. and Mexican Sections have to agree. It has not been approved to date; it is still being reviewed.

Question: Is the fence going to be removable and who will remove it?

Response: The fence will be removable and will be removed by DHS.

Question: How much fence and how much wall?

Response: Several miles of fence; the wall issue is still being reviewed.

Question: Will it be a chain link fence or a wall?

Response: Don't know the specifics but should be removable.

Question: Is there a guarantee of the removal of the fence or wall during a flood?

Response: Once the flow reaches 200,000 cubic feet per second, it will be the responsibility of DHS to remove it. They have to abide by flood control operations.

Question: Is the Valley ready for a 100-year flood?

Question: What happens if we get a flood before then?

Response: You have to remember that it won't flood everything. Our levees are designed to contain flows within the floodway.

Question: What about the levee work in Cameron County? What happens if we get a flood?

Response: The levee work in Cameron Country should provide protection.

Comment: All the water will always go in the direction of Cameron County and go out to the Gulf.

Question: How many miles of levee do we have?

Response: 270 miles. 100 miles are along the river and the rest are divided between the floodways.

Comment: I have noticed that along Mile 12 N. and FM 88 west, they have done a good job of cleaning out the ditches. I think they should look at all the drainage ditches to see that they are properly cleaned.

Response: Drains below the apron of the headwalls have vegetation below the culverts but they can still handle the water in our floodway even with vegetation.

Comment: I read in the American Legion Magazine that there are a number of dams we have in the U.S. and it also shows the ones that are deficient. None are in fear of breaking in Texas.

Comment: Lack of maintenance at El Morillo Drain. It has structural issues and is failing or going to fail. Heavy vegetation is noticeable in the canal.

Response: Will work with the Mexican Section of the Commission on that since the Drain is located in Mexico.

Question: Is the Mexican Section responsible for El Morillo Drain?

Response: Mexico's National Water Commission (CONAGUA) is responsible but the Mexican Section of the Commission works in unison to work through both Sections at the federal level. The Lower Rio Grande Water Committee provides some of the funding for the project and a Mexican contractor provides the labor and submits a bill.

Comment: USIBWC retiree Carl Boyd congratulated the IBWC for doing a great job on the levee rehab. He added that it takes a great effort to do the levee rehab on top of the daily maintenance and priorities of the Project.

Comment: All levees from Cameron County to Hidalgo County should be completed by the end of September.

Question: Does FEMA certify the levees?

Response: We (IBWC) certify the levees. We have a checklist that we send to FEMA, FEMA then checks the list and says we have met all the specifications.

Question: Will they re-certify the levees?

Response: I cannot speak for FEMA but in El Paso they are trying to get partial certification and they are having a hard time doing so.

Comment: Geotechnical testing has to be done in the Rio Grande Valley. We will be awarding a contract soon.

Question: Is there criteria that mandates dumping water from Falcon Dam?

Response: IBWC recently had a Flood Workshop, specifications state that they release water from the dams based on their storage capacity.

Comment: In reference to Falcon and El Cuchillo Dams, if we get several inches of rain, and Falcon has to release, we will be in a circumstance we have never been in before.

Response: In that situation, we will coordinate with Mexico, whenever there are large releases, we are always notified by Mexico.

Question: Will there be future work?

Response: There will be future work when appropriations become available.

Question: Who determines what counties and levees and how much?

Response: Levees don't know county lines. We began in Cameron County and within that segment there are 2 miles that fall into Hidalgo County.

Question: Who will review?

Response: We have an agreement with Hidalgo County to raise all the levees to the City of Hidalgo. Then address sections with DHS to construct the levee-wall concept which is still subject to review.

Question: Will it be a local contractor?

Response: Yes

Question: What is IBWC's involvement with the 2 bridges being built in Rio Bravo and Anzalduas?

Response: IBWC involvement relates strictly to the Presidential Permits that are required. IBWC reviews the plans to ensure that there are no obstruction issues and that everything complies with the 1970 Treaty to meet criteria for both Sections of the Commission.

With no further questions or comments, Chair Patrick Daize asked if there were any recommendations or action items for the next meeting. The following were suggested:

- \* Status on Amistad Dam
- \* Pairing up the Citizens' Forum and the Lower Rio Grande Water Committee meetings On October 15<sup>th</sup> at 2:00pm to only have one meeting that day.
- \* Have Andrew Cannon, MPO present his power point presentation of the Regional Planning in Hidalgo County.
- \* Report on El Morillo Drain

At the end of the meeting, Patrick Daize was asked by William Keltner of La Feria News if he wanted to comment about the levee work to the public. Such as, do we feel the work is constructed to withstand a flood.

Response: All phases of the work are properly controlled by a technical laboratory to ensure appropriate densities are achieved. Those areas that don't meet the required densities are reworked until they pass.

After which the reporter took pictures of Commissioner Wood, Al Riera, and new Area

Operations Manager and Forum Chair Patrick Daize.

\*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.