

## **We must rescue Rio Grande**

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Just recently, word reached many of us that the Rio Grande had dried up in Big Bend National Park for the first time since the severe drought of the 1950s. Pictures taken by a park biologist show the river as a series of small shallow pools lying at the bottom of towering canyon walls.

Images of a troubled Rio Grande are becoming all too familiar. From late 2001 to early this year, a sandbar closed off the mouth of the river where it normally flows into the Gulf of Mexico. It seems unprecedented that the Rio Grande would stop flowing both in midbasin and at the mouth within so short a time.

The threats to the Rio Grande are many and varied. Extensive damming and diversion for human use combined with water-sucking salt cedar have contributed to the river's decline. Water conflicts rage among user groups and between governments on both sides of the border. But those threats have been present for some time. Why are such drastic effects now being seen?

The answer is drought – drought in northern Mexico, which has greatly reduced inflows from the Rio Conchos, and drought in the Upper Rio Grande basin, which has reduced the snowpack in the Rockies and resulted in very low releases from dams upstream of El Paso. Coming after several decades of relatively wet years, the drought has revealed the weaknesses in the 1944 U.S.-Mexico water treaty and exposed the flaws in our binational water management system.

It isn't time to give up on the Rio Grande. Rather, we must redouble our efforts to rescue and protect the ecological treasure.

- Overhaul management of the binational river. The International Boundary and Water Commission lacks the leadership needed to push for more authority to review dam construction or expansion and crack down on illegal diversions. The commission desperately needs a leader who will negotiate with stakeholders and be a strong advocate for the river.
- Remove the dense salt cedar forest that is blocking the river between Fort Quitman and Big Bend National Park and restore native vegetation. Restoring that stretch, known as the "Forgotten River," would enhance river flows, produce more water for agriculture in the Presidio area, increase local revenue from nature tourism and provide more water for users in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.
- Provide more year-round water flow in the Rio Grande from Elephant Butte Reservoir in New Mexico. Water from the reservoir now is released only during irrigation season. Since

it is a federal reservoir, the federal government must take the lead in developing such an operating agreement, but all interests – the states of Texas and New Mexico, agriculture, municipal users and conservation groups – should be involved.

None of those changes will be easy, and all will require dialogue, federal and state leadership and participation from all stakeholders. But if action doesn't start today, events like those we have begun to witness over the last few years could become the norm rather than the exception.

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