

## El Paso area rancher gives water back to the Rio Grande

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By CHRIS ROBERTS Associated Press Writer , © The Associated Press

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While everybody else wants to use water from the Rio Grande, rancher Kit Bramblett is giving some back.

Bramblett is the first person to donate water to the Texas Water Trust, established in 1997 to protect water quality and fish and wildlife habitat in rivers around the state.

The Hudspeth County Attorney gave up his right to use 1,236 acre feet of water on his ranch, contributing it instead to the trust managed by the Texas Water Development Board. An acre-foot equals about 326,000 gallons, enough to serve one or two families for a year.

"Mine's just a drop in the bucket. It's just a place to start," said Bramblett, whose family has ranched and farmed in West Texas since the 1930s.

The donated water will benefit a stretch of the Rio Grande between El Paso and Big Bend National Park known as "the forgotten river" because not much lives there \_ plant, animal or human.

Bramblett's ranch, which is near the southern end of the Eagle Mountains and south of Van Horn, is bordered on the west by about 23 miles of Rio Grande riverfront.

Water rights along the upper part of the Rio Grande are ruled by a priority system that is pinned on the date the landowner "perfected" the right and the amount of water the right holder can take out of the river.

A water right can be perfected in two ways. Before the 1960s, landowners had to prove they used a certain amount of water consistently over time to secure a right. After the 1960s, the date a right application was completed and filed with the state set the standard.

When the river runs low, people with the oldest rights can draw the amount of water they are allowed until there is nothing left.

The water donated by Bramblett was attached to 400 acres of land first farmed by his father in the 1940s. Bramblett still holds rights he uses to water about 60 head of cattle he runs on his 20,000-acre spread.

Bramblett says he remembers a time when the river ran a mile wide and "had good water in it."

But water was appropriated for use by ranchers, farmers and urban dwellers. Then water officials began filling up Elephant Butte Reservoir in New Mexico. By the 1950s, the Rio Grande dried up regularly, Bramblett said, despite a 1939 river compact among Texas, New Mexico and Colorado

that was supposed to guarantee water for Texas ranchers.

The river was so dry "you could ride a horse right down the middle of it," he said.

His father, relying on the compact, took the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, Bramblett said. The case lingered and was never heard for what he believes were political reasons.

In the mid-'60s, after Texan Lyndon B. Johnson became president, the case went to the court and the Bramblett's won, he said. It was another five years before water again flowed regularly in the Rio Grande.

The "forgotten river" area is now experiencing a drought, since snow in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado that usually flows to it from the Rio Grande has been sparse. That snow, more than anything, determines how strong the river runs each year.

The river went dry this spring for the first time since the early '70s, Bramblett said. He decided to make the donation to keep that from happening again.

Although the amount of Bramblett's donation is small, it is important, said David Bradsby, a water resources program leader with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

It is water that, most of the time, will be left in the river, he said.

Environmentalists and state officials say the long-term importance of the donation may be even greater if it draws attention to the trust.

"A lot of people don't understand the need to do this," said Myron Hess, the National Wildlife Federation's Texas water programs manager. "The state hasn't done a good job of selling (the trust) or facilitating donations."

The program needs money to do that, said Colette Barron, an attorney for the Parks and Wildlife Resource Protection Division. Water conservation has not been a "hot button" issue, she said, and state budget shortfalls haven't helped.

"We need to find ways to support it financially," she said. "We have to provide incentives to draw people into it."

Bramblett hopes other people will follow his example to save what he calls a vital resource.

"I hope it might inspire some other people, if not to give all their water rights, to give some," he said.