

Valley irrigators get water debt update

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WESLACO - Mexico is on track to pay almost half of its outstanding water debt to the United States by the end of the 2004 fiscal year, an official with the International Boundary and Water Commission told Rio Grande irrigators last week.

Carlos Marin, deputy commissioner of the bi-national commission, said Mexico had by Jan. 10 made the average annual payment required under a 1944 treaty and thanks to bountiful rainfall was continuing to transfer water to the U.S. The treaty stipulates that the United States and Mexico share water from the Rio Grande and Colorado River.

"We figure that by the end of the cycle year there should be an additional 400,000 to 500,000 acre feet," Marin said.

The water debt stands at 1.2 million acre feet, with an acre foot being enough water to flood an acre of land a foot deep.

Marin said some Mexican reservoirs were so full that a hurricane would pose a severe flooding threat to the Rio Grande Valley.

However, those reservoirs are not in the northern tributaries specified in the treaty. However some Valley irrigators were concerned that the water was coming from rain overflows, rather than from Mexico's stores in northern reservoirs.

The South Texans contend Mexico is hoarding the water to irrigate its own crops and ignoring the water treaty.

The water debt was discussed as the IBWC held its fifth "citizens' forum" since the severe drought conditions in deep South Texas turned Mexico's decade-old debt into a crisis. Some farmers went out of business, while others burned groves or held back on planting to conserve water.

Marin also gave an update on an extensive anti-terrorism study ordered by the federal government after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

He said a team of U.S. and Mexican officials had identified 400 possible targets along the shared river and dams, mostly involving ways to contaminate the water.

While technology might not be able to decipher every foreign substance in the water, quality monitors could be put in place to at least detect if something was wrong, Marin said.

An initial \$ 25 million has been spent, much of it to help Mexico increase security.

The Rio Grande is the sole water source for millions of people in both Mexico and the U.S.

"We can't protect just half the dam," he said.

The implementation plan would cost about \$ 40.6 million, yet there was no word on when or if the money would be approved.