

'Forgotten River' focus of water conservation effort

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Over the past three decades, Big Bend residents have watched as water levels and water quality in the Rio Grande have declined ? a decline that became strikingly evident last spring, when the Rio Grande ran dry within parts of Big Bend National Park.

Now, an environmental non-profit organization has set its sights on addressing one cause of the river's decline ? the non-native plant known as salt cedar.

Environmental Defense is seeking federal funds to study the eradication of salt cedar along the "Forgotten River" segment of the Rio Grande, Karen Chapman, a water and wildlife analyst from the group's Austin office, told the Far West Texas Regional Water Planning Group recently.

Introduced in the early 20th century to stabilize river banks, salt cedar has since flourished along rivers throughout the West. Salt cedar, also known as tamarisk, consumes about twice as much water as species native to the Big Bend like cottonwood and willow, Chapman said. By leaching salt back into the river, salt cedar also degrades water quality.

"Salt cedar is one of the biggest problems we have along the Forgotten River," Chapman said. "It establishes itself and sends millions of seeds downstream. When you have it, it's very tough to get rid of."

The "Forgotten River" refers to the stretch of the Rio Grande between Fort Quitman, 75 miles east of El Paso, and the Amistad Reservoir near Del Rio, though Chapman said her organization is focused particularly on the area between Fort Quitman and Presidio. Acres of salt cedar choke the river along much of this stretch, and no clear river channel remains.

"What you have is a river that really doesn't function like a natural river any more," Chapman said.

Salt cedar is not the only factor influencing water levels on the "Forgotten River"; 10 years of drought conditions, the dams at Elephant Butte and Caballo in New Mexico and heavy irrigation use upstream have also affected the segment of river. But farmers in the Presidio area said that salt cedar has been an important factor in lower levels.

Terry Bishop, whose family has farmed in Presidio since 1965, said he has seen water levels in the river drop significantly during his lifetime ? and that salt cedar is in part to blame.

"You always get ebbs and flows, but there was a much steadier supply of water years back," Bishop said. By eradicating salt cedar, he said, "I'm sure you could add tens of thousands of acre-feet of water to the river every year."

Frank Armendariz, a lifelong Presidio farmer, said the poor water quality created by salt cedar has directly affected what the region's farmers can grow, forcing them to switch from highly profitable crops like cantaloupe and onions to hay and alfalfa.

"We quit growing cantaloupes and onions and all the vegetables we used to grow because it got to where they were not doing well because of the salt," Armendariz said.

"Those are very expensive crops ? if you don't have the quality of water you're going to wind up losing money. As salty as that water is, we're afraid to plant anything and lose it because we don't have the money to lose."

Armendariz said that while farmers can ride out fluctuations in the market, bad water quality makes it virtually impossible to operate.

"With bad water you can't make it," he said. "No way."

Salt cedar eradication would have a significant impact in improving farming in the region and in bringing water back into the river, Armendariz said.

"I'm pretty sure that if they could be killed on both sides of the river ? in Mexico and in the U.S. ? that river would start running again," he said.

The funding Environmental Defense seeks would be a first step in salt cedar eradication and would allow for an assessment of the problem and consideration of eradication techniques. Chapman said the group would like to see eradication complemented by the restoration of native species and the clearing of the river channel.

Salt cedar eradication using herbicide has been conducted along the Pecos River with some success, Chapman said, though the dead plants were not removed, or replaced with other species.

Salt cedar eradication efforts along the "Forgotten River" must contend with the bi-national nature of the problem; for eradication to be effective, it must be conducted on both U.S. and Mexican banks of the river. While Environmental Defense has held a workshop and made contact with officials in Ojinaga, the group has not met with higher level officials in Mexico, Chapman said.

Chapman said that the time for addressing salt cedar on the "Forgotten River" may have arrived. Environmental Defense is following a bill being considered in Congress, sponsored by Rep. Steve Pearce of New Mexico, which would provide funds for assessing salt cedar problems. The bill is awaiting review in the Senate.

"We feel like there's a lot of support for this effort right now," Chapman said.