



Early release of water to Mexico means less for US users  
By Diana Washington Valdez \ El Paso Times El Paso Times  
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Early release of water to Mexico will result in the loss of enough water to keep Brownsville -- population of nearly 200,000 -- going for a year, according to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

"The latest estimates by the irrigation districts puts the loss at closer to 50,000 acre-feet," said Terry Clawson, commission spokesman in Austin. "To help put that in perspective, the city of Brownsville uses less than 40,000 acre-feet in a year."

The loss stems from charging the river channel (wetting it), and evaporation and other factors, Clawson said.

"Conveyance losses always occur when water is sent down dry waterways," Clawson said. "But water loss is minimized when large amounts of water are sent quickly down waterways as few times as possible, as opposed to sending smaller amounts of water more often."

State officials blamed the U.S. section of the International Boundary and Water Commission for the early release of river water -- 12,225 acre-feet that Mexico requested and that was delivered Friday -- that resulted in this loss.

In a letter dated April 9 to the water commission, Texas Rio Grande Compact Commissioner Patrick Gordon said, "Your estimated 4,200 (acre-feet) water loss is grossly inaccurate. The districts were not provided this estimate until after your decision to release."

"Based on initial river reports, the losses could double the estimated 25,000 acre-feet. Under the Convention of 1906, the U.S. water users are responsible for all water conveyance losses for the delivery to Mexico," Gordon added.

One acre-foot of water is the amount needed to cover an acre to the depth of one foot.

International Boundary and Water Commission U.S. Commissioner Edward Drusina and other key officials were in Mexico on Tuesday and were unavailable for comment.

Gordon said the U.S. water districts that use this water had planned on taking allocations beginning in May, to conserve water and because of the extreme drought in the region.

"This would conserve water and ensure that all users, including Mexico (due to a proportionality clause in the treaty), would receive the most water possible," Gordon's letter said.

Water from the river is stored at Elephant Butte and Caballo Lake dams. A lack of rainfall and lower than average snowpack in northern New Mexico and Colorado, where the river begins, has led to lower storage levels at the dams.

The 1,890-mile Rio Grande flows downstream all the way to Brownsville and the Gulf of Mexico.

Texas officials said the worst drought in 40 years in the region is already forcing the U.S. government to reduce the allotments of water to the irrigation districts by more half, and the early release to Mexico means there will be less water for everyone.

Last week, International Boundary and Water Commission officials said that Mexico, which is entitled to 60,000 acre-feet, is guaranteed only 12,225 acre-feet this year.

The city of El Paso relies on water from the Rio Grande for 50 percent of its drinking water each year.

"The water in question is gone and cannot be recaptured," Clawson said. "But hopefully, we can persuade the IBWC to take Texas and the U.S. irrigation districts' advice and expertise into account in future decisions and to protect the interests of U.S. water users."

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