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U.S., Mexico reach agreement in water debt

EL PASO (AP) - U.S. and Mexican officials signed a water deal Saturday that includes the release of 90,000 acre-feet of water from the Falcon Reservoir, providing short-term relief to drought-stricken farmers in the Rio Grande Valley.

The agreement marks the end of Mexico's 10-year failure to meet the terms of a 1944 water-sharing treaty. Mexico currently owes the United States about 1.5 million acre feet of water, a debt that has been mounting since 1992. An acre-foot is enough to cover one acre of land with one foot of water, about 326,000 gallons. A date for the water release has not been given.

"This is a good beginning," said U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison. "Although it may be too late to save this year's crops, this initial water release gets the cycle of payment started. Now we must work even harder to find a permanent solution to the mounting water debt that's devastating our Valley farmers."

Kathy Walt, spokeswoman for Gov. Rick Perry, said the release will be an important and welcome demonstration of Mexico's good faith effort toward meeting its obligation under the treaty.

"Mexico must take the next step, which is to commit to a regular schedule of water releases," Walt said.

However, U.S. Rep. Solomon Ortiz, D-Corpus Christi, was unhappy with the announcement, saying that the release of 90,000 acre-feet of water is "about 200,000 acre feet less than our farmers and water users need right now."

"And with the effects of evaporation and hydrilla, much less than 90,000 will reach the irrigation districts of South Texas water users," Ortiz said.

The agreement includes several stipulations intended to ease the debt's accumulation, including the endorsement of a binational financial package for water conservation initiatives. The move marks the first time both governments intend to invest jointly in measures for water conservation, sustainability and efficiency in the region. The agreement also mandates the modernization of the hydrological infrastructure, with the goal of achieving greater efficiency in water use.

"The agreement reached contributes to resolving the water problems along the border, taking into account immediate needs as well as concrete actions to be taken in the medium and long term," said Richard Boucher, spokesman for the State Department, in a written statement.

"In this way, both governments will assure more efficient use of water in Rio Grande basin, which will permit guaranteed supply for Mexican users, and compliance with the obligations established under the 1944 Treaty for the benefit of U.S. users," he said.

"Both governments agree on the importance of this agreement to meet the immediate needs on our common border, as well as to stimulate projects that will produce a long-term solution to this sensitive topic," Mexico President Vicente Fox said in a statement. Mexico is seeking funds for a huge irrigation improvement project that could involve funds from the jointly controlled North American Development Bank. But South Texas farmers and politicians have said the United States should not be sending any funds to help competing Mexican farmers without guarantees owed treaty water was coming their way.

Perry has said Washington would insist that any NADBank funded projects benefit both sides of the border equally.

Perry said he would fight to make sure projects didn't begin until Mexico had committed to paying the debt in its entirety.