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Region M requests president's assistance with water crisis

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McALLEN — Water releases, low incoming water flows and a lack of communication are prompting the Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group, Region M to seek support from President George W. Bush to local taxing entities.

The RGRWPG executive board approved Wednesday sending a resolution requesting support for a solution to the Rio Grande Valley's water supply shortage.

The resolution specifically urges "President Bush and the Congress of the United States to press forward on the dual effort of obtaining Mexico's compliance with the 1944 Water Treaty and the provision of funds to implement the water conservation program recommended in Region M's Water Plan."

The Region M Water Plan, which is being amended, is now part of the Texas Water Development Board's statewide plan.

Under a 1944 Treaty, Mexico is required to deliver an average of 350,000 acre-feet of water per year to the United States, mostly from the Rio Conchos Basin in Chihuahua. In return, the United States must deliver 1.5 million acre-feet of water per year to Mexico from the Colorado River.

One acre-foot is 325,000 gallons, or enough water to cover an acre one-foot deep.

While the United States has complied with the treaty, Mexico, claiming extraordinary drought, has been falling behind on its repayments since 1992. Mexico currently owes the United States more than 1.37 million acre-feet of water.

"This isn't the first time that we've coordinated a resolution. About two years ago when it was becoming apparent that Mexico would become in debt to its five-year water commitment, we issued a resolution," said Kenneth Jones Jr., executive director of the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council.

During the past few months, the board has received requests to remind the Bush administration that water continues to be a priority to the region, he said.

"The first resolution we sent did get some responses from the U.S. State Department and some additional agreements were instituted to make Mexico minimize its deficit," Jones said. "But those agreements haven't been met. Hopefully, this resolution will produce a positive solution to Mexico's compliance problems," he said.

Communication problems also are at the forefront of the board's concerns particularly since Mexico began releasing massive amounts of Falcon Lake water almost two weeks ago.

"Mexico initiated releases from Falcon which were questioned by the U.S. because Mexico in previous discussions had stated that no releases would be made out of Falcon during this water year," wrote Carlos Marin, International Boundary and Water Commission deputy commissioner, in a letter to the executive board.

Marin also said the U.S. section of the IBWC has been requesting a 2003 water plan from Mexico since July 2002, but the plan has not yet been supplied to the commission.

Mexico also hasn't been releasing water from the Rio Conchos, the major river tributary in Chihuahua that drains into the Rio Grande, said Carlos Rubinstein, Rio Grande Watermaster for the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

"We're very concerned about this," he said. "The water flows are very low in the Presidio area. This may affect Lake Amistad's ability to retain water levels later in the year."

In other business, the members filled two vacancies on the board. Maverick County Jose Aranda will be filling a seat designated for county representation and Gary Whittington, general manager for UniFirst Linen Service in Harlingen, has been selected to fill the 'other interest category' vacancy.

The members also re-elected chairman Glenn Jarvis, secretary Mary Lou Campbell and executive committee members Robert Fulbright and Robert Gonzalez. Charles, "Chuck" Browning was selected to fill the vice-chairman position.

Although members were added to the board, a motion to postpone voting on term limits until the next meeting also was accepted. A member, who currently serves for five years, can be on the board for two terms. Browning, who serves on the bylaws committee, said his committee probably will have three options for the members to vote upon. The options could be to extend the number of terms, to delete the word 'limit,' or not make any changes.