

Biology Committee Meeting, Paso del Norte Watershed Council

May 26, 2015 9:30 AM

Biology Committee, PDNWC, Kevin Bixby Chair; Brian Hanson CoChair

at Southwest Environmental Center at 275 North Downtown Mall Las Cruces 88001

Attendees – Brian Hanson, Conrad Keyes, Jan Kirwan, Gill Sorg, Walt Whitford (retired Ecology Professor), Elizabeth Verdecchia via phone

Agenda

1. Flows from the Las Cruces Treatment Plant (a group of citizens is exploring this)

Jan and Walt both stated that the flow in the Rio Grande from the treatment plant is beneficial to wildlife when there is no flow in the channel. If a wetland was built in the floodplain there, it might reduce flows in the Rio Grande. She also said a wetland could be a problem with hunters. Jan also mentioned that 4 wheelers have torn up the riverbed and caused a berm that is preventing flow downstream. Elizabeth stated that IBWC could relandscape it to allow flow again, but Jan said since the river will be flowing this week, it is not worth it now. The Dona Ana Sheriffs office has been granted enforcement authority on USIBWC property including the river bed. Jan suggested that next winter that IBWC and the Sheriffs office work together to prevent streambed problems.

Gill Sorg said that the Treatment Plant must deliver their water to the river. If a wetland is there, they still must deliver the same amount to the river.

As far as wildlife habitat, I would like to see a wetland and flows in the river. It might need more water from the City to do this since the wetland would consume some water. It would take some work to determine how much water would be needed and to get a permit for the wetland water use. IBWC would have to be involved also since it would be in the floodplain. Is this small size wetland worth the trouble?

2. Small flood control dams

Brian asked if BLM could show us some of the dams but they were not available today. Conrad mentioned that BLM does have workshops that inform the dam owners what they need to do for maintenance.

3. Update on Lower Rio Grande Region State Water Planning (Dona Ana County); Environmental Use, group 4

A lot of discussion on this topic.

Brian mentioned that the group is looking at submitting a flow (cfs) and volume (acre-feet) needed for permanent flows from Caballo to El Paso. Kevin calculated that a 200 cfs release is needed for the Rio Grande during the non irrigation season. He also calculated a total need of 74,900 acre feet per year (during a normal year).

Base flow during non irrigation – 47,000 acre feet

Peak flows – 1,900

Floodplain vegetation – 26,000

Total – 74,900

Elizabeth comment on draft notes – Just contemplating, these numbers seem low. The 2013 USIBWC Water Budget Study calculated variable seepage losses (depending on model and scenario), ranging from 60,000 to 104,000 ac-ft of water that seeped into the river bed or was lost to evaporation just during the irrigation season. These numbers will likely change now that the drought is in its numerous consecutive year.

Also, as part of the Environmental use group, Brian developed a 3 year proposal (\$69,000) to further study the river to document how many miles of river are wet, collect historic flow information, and establish what flow would be needed to support a healthy ecosystem. Conrad mentioned that the EIS for the El Paso-Las Cruces Regional Sustainable Water Project that IBWC/EPWU completed has requirements for environmental enhancements in the river. Conrad also stated that the NM Water Quality Control Commission has authority to require discharges be made to the river which could be another source of water.

After the Biology meeting, Brian visited with the NM Cooperative Research Unit at NMSU. Brian visited with Ken Boykin (575-646-6303, kboykin@nmsu.edu). Someone would have to define what a healthy flow would be. Ken suggested using a drone to fly the river and document river conditions. He said it sounded like a good Masters program. A student would cost \$22,000 per year for 2 ½ years. I also visited with Wiebke Boeing, Associate Professor, College of Agricultural, Consumer and Environmental Sciences, Agricultural Experiment Station, Dept. of Fish, Wildlife, and Conservation Ecology (575-646-1707; wboeing@nmsu.edu). She has a background in lakes and aquatic organisms. She said that it could be a good graduate program. She likes the idea of having a flowing river. She stressed that a graduate student could coordinate with all the different disciplines and it would make it a better study.

The Environmental Use group is thinking that a healthy floodplain is needed and Brian developed a paper on floodplain benefits (attached). During the Biology meeting today Brian mentioned that a study in California showed an increase in the ground water of 1,000 acre feet because the floodplain was widened and captured water during flooding events. (<http://californiawaterblog.com/2015/04/09/making-every-drop-count-in-drought-and-deluge/>)

4. Drought Contingency Planning, US Bureau of Reclamation

Since no one from the Bureau was present, we didn't talk about this much. The Bureau will fund water users to develop Drought Contingency Plans and build long-term drought resiliency, proposal due June 15, 2015. The group that gets the funding must be a water user. www.usbr.gov/drought.

5. Proposed Biology Conference

Since Kevin volunteered to organize this, Brian said he would talk to Kevin and get a draft plan from him and discuss it at the next Biology Committee meeting. The group had conflicting ideas about the target audience. Should we invite technical speakers? Should we target the general public with watershed or water information? Gill Sorg said that the City already had tv programs to educate the public.

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