

**Minutes
Executive Committee
Paso del Norte Watershed Council**

**Monday, 1:00-2:30 pm, March 22, 2004
Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Tribal Judicial Community Center
9241 Socorro Road, El Paso, TX**

In Attendance:

Sue Watts, Chair Ari Michelsen, Treasurer
Nancy Hanks, Program Coordinator
Christopher Brown, Department of Geography, New Mexico State University
Tim Darden, New Mexico Department of Agriculture
Mike Fahy, El Paso Water Utilities
Miguel A. Flores, Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agrícolas y Pecuarias
Inga Groff, League of Women Voters
Joe Groff, Chihuahuan Desert Wildlife Rescue
Jacob Massoud, Ysleta del Sur Pueblo
Mike Mecke, Texas Water Resources Institute, Texas A&M University
Dan Santantonio, City of Las Cruces
Zuping Sheng, Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, Texas A&M University
John Sproul, Rio Bosque Wetlands Park
Rosemary Staley, City of El Paso
Jim Stefanov, International Boundary and Water Commission, U. S. Section
Beatriz Vera, Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin Coalition

1. Convene Meeting

Sue Watts convened the meeting at 1:07 pm. There were no changes to the agenda.

2. Approval of Minutes from January 26, 2004

Approval of the minutes from the previous meeting was delayed until there was a majority of Executive Committee members present. There were no changes to the minutes.

3. Canalization Draft EIS comments

The Executive Committee was provided with the comments submitted by the Watershed Council to the IBWC regarding its Draft EIS. Sue Watts explained that the comments had originally been eight pages long, but she deleted certain sections at the request of various Council members. Mike Fahy asked if the Council had a copy of the comments sent to the IBWC by EPWU. No one present had received copies of those comments. He promised to provide them with copies that would then be distributed to the entire Council. The Executive Committee was also provided with the comments submitted by the Rio Grande Alliance.

Dan Santantonio said that the City of Las Cruces did not comment on the Draft EIS and he was concerned that the IBWC had no preferred alternative. Sue said she thought the IBWC was going to announce the preferred alternative when they make the final decree, which is not the ideal situation. Dan noted that the irrigation districts did not participate on the Watershed Council, even though they were included in the legal mandate that created the Watershed Council. He thought that the Watershed Council could provide a forum for discussing water issues in a non-threatening setting. The conclusion was that perhaps individual members of irrigation districts should be invited to participate.

[At this point in the meeting the Executive Committee reached a quorum (defined as a majority of Committee members) and the minutes from January 26 were approved; Rosemary moved for approval, Beatriz seconded, and the vote was unanimous.]

4. Environmental Assessment for the El Paso Border Barrier Project

In 1999 the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers prepared an Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact for a project that involved “Installation of Fencing, Lights, Cameras, Guardrails, and Sensors Along the American Canal Extension El Paso District,” which now extends from downtown El Paso

to just north of the Zaragosa Bridge. The INS now proposes to install additional lighting along the base of the Rio Grande levee from Riverside Diversion Dam to Las Pampas Colonia near San Elizario, a path which passes by the Rio Bosque Wetlands Park. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers is the lead agency for the project.

Jacob Massoud distributed the Corps' Draft Supplemental Finding of No Significant Impact for the new project. He discussed his concerns about the impact of such a project on wildlife along the river and asked if the Council would comment when the time came. Ari Michelsen said he thought that the Border Patrol was capable of monitoring with remote sensors and shouldn't need lights on all the time. Jacob explained that the Border Patrol wants the lights for the safety of its officers. Ari asked John Sproul if his group is planning to respond. John said they provided comments during scoping for the environmental analysis and were now waiting for the Draft Environmental Assessment (EA), which should be completed this summer.

Sue asked if the Border Patrol could target certain roads with the lights so that they shine at the point where people cross the river. Jacob said that the Border Patrol has considered this stretch of the river fairly well-protected because of the nearby presence of the Jonathan W. Rogers Water Treatment Plant and the Bustamante Wastewater Treatment Plant. Jim Stefanov said that the whole stretch of levee at that location is undergoing a structural assessment and the IBWC is hoping the Corps will send the EA to them before they do much more. Sue asked if there was something the Council should be doing now, but Jacob said he only brought this up as an informational item at this time.

John Sproul reported that there is another problem at the Rio Bosque Wetlands Park. The El Paso County Water Improvement District No. 1 (EP#1) currently has a contractor drilling irrigation wells along the Park. John said that despite the long process of planning these wells, no one appeared to consider their effect on the Park, and that the Park only learned about them when drilling materials began to arrive. He said he has recommended some modest modifications to EP#1, such as moving the wells to the other side of the Riverside Canal, but because the recommendations came so late in the process, their implementation is uncertain.

Sue said there were monitoring wells inside the Park and that the Park has been able to show that when an existing well (pulling 1000 gallons per minute, or gpm) is functioning, it pulls groundwater from up to 600 feet away. The new wells are designed to pull 1700 gpm, and there are 5 of them adjacent to the park, as well as 4 others nearby. Mike Fahy stated that the intention of the wells was to increase the water supply to farmers during drought. Sue said that the Park only has groundwater, and that these wells will take that away. Mike Mecke stated that the wells were probably pulling riparian river water.

5. Council Activities

New Members. There were no new members to report.

MAC/SC meeting February 19, 2004. Program Coordinator Nancy Hanks reported on her presentation to the MAC/SC about the Water 2025 Challenge Grant and the Water Conservation Field Services Program Grant, two grant RFPs from the Bureau of Reclamation. The MAC/SC asked her and Mike Fahy to work on a proposal for EPWU to submit with the irrigation districts under the Water 2025 Challenge Grant. Mike explained that there was a need to share information from the SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisitions) systems used by EPWU, EP#1, and EBID so as to permit more efficient decision-making by all three entities. He said, however, that EP#1 would not meet and that EPWU decided not to go forward because of that. He expressed the hope that relations with EP#1 would improve in the future.

Council Representation at Meetings. [This topic was inadvertently left out at this time, but was discussed later in the meeting.] Nancy asked that there be a procedure used to determine who would represent the Council at meetings, citing Sue's recent last-minute presentation at a U. S. Fish and Wildlife conference. Sue stated that she has created a PowerPoint presentation (working from an earlier one by Valerie) of information about the Council and it can now be used by Council members who are asked to speak at public meetings. Sue said she will circulate her presentation to get comments on it.

Groundwork USA. Nancy reported that she had filled out a survey from a group, Groundwork USA, regarding working on brownfields. Rosemary Staley stated that Groundwork USA was a spin-off from the El Paso River Park Task Force and it was a program of the National Park Service but implemented

through El Paso County. She said that once the feasibility study was completed, they would try beautification projects in small areas, and that one of the first would be in the vicinity of Chamizal and Bowie High School.

Grant proposals status

Border 2012. Nancy reported that the EPA was behind schedule in reviewing the Border 2012 grant proposals and would notify applicants by mid-April.

River Network. Nancy provided copies of the final report she wrote to River Network, which gives the Council a snapshot of what the organization has accomplished to date.

Phase II of the Coordinated Database. Chris reported on the status of the Cooperative Agreement, which has passed through all the signatures and is now underway. Bimonthly conference calls will be held by all the participants.

EPWU Cooperative Grant. Nancy reported that this Cooperative Agreement had likewise progressed.

Integrated Watershed Management Plan. Nancy distributed copies of the Plan. She reported that Rebecca Rizutti of Sen. Bingaman's office had forwarded her the RFP for the Wetlands Program. She distributed this RFP and others, as well as a press release from Bingaman's office regarding funding for the Upper and Middle Rio Grande. Sue requested that the IWMP Committee examine the Plan to see if it could be used for this grant application or others and report at the next meeting.

6. Budget

Ari distributed a summary sheet of the current grant awards and explained the budgets for them. He explained that some money from the Bureau of Reclamation has been expended for Nancy's salary but was not shown because of the lag in accounting records. He distributed copies of the March 11, 2004, issue of "Drought Watch on the Rio Grande." It is uncertain when the next issue would come out because the Department of the Interior was under a court-ordered injunction to suspend its email and Internet connections.

Sue added that the Council needs to get additional grant funding to supplement EPWU's funding of the Program Coordinator position. She suggested applying to private foundations and other groups within the next two to three months.

7. Update of Business Plan, Strategic Plan, and By-Laws (Sue Watts)

Sue asked that a committee be formed to review and update the Council's Business Plan, Strategic Plan, and By-Laws. She appointed Beatriz Vera, Rosemary Staley, and Mike Landis to report to the Council at the next meeting about this review and update.

8. Meetings Recently Attended

It was reported that Conrad Keyes attended the March 11 URGWOM meeting in Albuquerque. Christopher Brown said that he would work with Phil King and Zuping Sheng on the Corps part of the Coordinated Database/GIS Project.

Ari Michelsen stated that he had testified at the Texas Senate Select Committee on Water Policy on February 3, 2004, in El Paso. He added that others who had testified included Ed Archuleta (EPWU) and John Ashworth (LBG Guyton Associates). He said more hearings have been held by the Committee and its Subcommittee on the Lease of State Water Rights in Dell City and Marfa. He stated that the Subcommittee would eventually provide a report and recommendations including those on proposed leases of the water under state-owned lands managed by the General Land Office.

Jim Stefanov reported on a workshop, "Improving the Application of Science in Western Drought Management & Planning," presented by the USGS, the IBWC, and the Western Governors' Association on March 11-12, in Tempe, Arizona.

There was a report on a work group that is part of a binational effort to enhance the Rio Grande/Rio Bravo ecosystem. This group met at the end of January 2004 to revive a binational salt cedar control proposal.

9. Upcoming Meetings that Will be Attended

There will be a conference on April 5-7 in Las Cruces regarding the Rio Grande Basin Initiative, and it will include a talk by the New Mexico State Engineer, John D'Antonio, on April 5 from 9-11:00 am. On

April 7, the conference will provide a tour of an irrigation project which uses treated wastewater on plants. Zuping Sheng will be attending this conference.

Ari Michelsen reported that the Far West Texas Water Planning Group will meet in Marfa on Thursday, March 25 and a GAMS meeting will be held in Alpine that evening. He announced that Environmental Defense has a water meeting in Austin on April 23 at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center.

Ari also reported that on Monday, March 29, at 9:30 am, there would be a presentation by a faculty candidate for Water Resources and Salinity Management at the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station, Texas A&M University. He said that another faculty position, in Urban Landscape/Water Conservation, has been filled by Dr. Genhua Niu, who will start on May 3.

Mike Mecke reported that he would be attending a SCERP (Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy) conference sponsored by Texas A&M Kingsville, "Sustainable Development in the Rio Bravo/Rio Grande Borderlands," on April 1. Christopher Brown added that SCERP would have its Border Institute VI in Rio Rico, Arizona on April 26-28. This conference will focus on Transboundary Ecosystem Management.

10. Date and location of the next Executive Committee Meeting

The next meeting was determined to be held in Las Cruces on April 30 at 2:00 pm.

11. Other Business

Nancy Hanks asked if it would be appropriate for her to publicize the Executive Committee meetings. The Executive Committee did not vote on this. Nancy suggested putting a free notice in the newspapers for the next meeting as a trial. No one disagreed.

Tim Darden requested that there be a disclaimer on letters sent out by the Council as a whole, such as the letter to the IBWC commenting on their Draft EIS. Sue Watts agreed this would be appropriate. Nancy stated that there will need to be earlier deadlines for such letters. Dan Santantonio stated that no one member should, at the last minute, be able to capture the agenda of the organization and use it for their own agenda.

Nancy pointed out the action items listed on the back of the agenda. She stated that from this point her policy would be to drop an action item after it has been on the list for over three agendas.

Christopher Brown suggested forming a subcommittee to apply for grants. Ari Michelsen said that it was important to screen RFPs to determine if they were appropriate. He stated that he has been doing this and would continue to forward them to Nancy, who will then forward them to the Council, as appropriate. He stated that it was important to make the objectives of the Council match those of the funding sources. Sue Watts stated that it was important to identify the goals of the Council and find funding to support those goals.

Dan Santantonio asked if there were grants that specifically supported watershed councils. Sue Watts responded that the Watershed Assistance Grant did that, but there weren't many grants like that. She suggested the Council apply for grants that funded technical projects or policy-making. Dan suggested forming an umbrella organization or coalition. Christopher Brown stated that he thought multiple task forces were the norm for these situations.

12. Adjournment

Jim Stefanov moved that the meeting be adjourned, Tim Darden seconded, and the vote was unanimous.