

## Clean Water and the U.S.-Mexico Border

### Part 2



This article is the conclusion of the "Clean Water and the U.S.-Mexico Border" story. As you recall in last's weeks article, research found the Tijuana area of Mexico was not only being polluted with hazardous waste, fecal contamination, and agricultural runoff, but there was not sufficient wastewater treatments plants in operation. A large percentage of the ongoing problem with contaminated water resources is contributed to the Maquiladora plants along the border of the U.S. and Mexico.

Over ten years ago, The U.S. and Mexico addressed the crisis of air pollution in Mexico, now there is a water crisis. The [Border Environmental Cooperation Commission](#) (BECC) was created as a result of

the North American Free Trade Agreement ([NAFTA](#)). It is designed to deal with some of the environmental problems along the border. The BECC will study current



environmental problems and determine which projects deserve more financing. The money will be administered through [NADBank](#) (North American Development Bank). [The Rio Grande River](#), which is the supplier of water for Mexico and Southern New Mexico is already polluted with raw sewage, and now contains toxic chemicals. The fish called the silvery minnow once flourishing in the waters

of the Rio Grande is now only found in a 40-mile radius around Albuquerque. This fish is now an endangered species. Not only is our ecology being threatened by the caustic water, but our unborn as well. In the counties surrounding Tijuana, Mexico, San Diego border and Brownsville, Texas there are reports of babies being born with anencephaly, (born without a brain), and retardation due to high levels of pesticides found in the body.

While the Clinton administration was serving, \$8 million was allotted over a 10 year span to clean-up the Rio Grande River. So far out of 47 programs developed to perform the clean-up task only 7 have been initiated under NAFTA.

Does there have to be a price to pay for opportunity and progress? If NAFTA had not brought in the U.S. industries along the U.S. Mexico border, would we now be having such a crisis with the Rio Grande? Of course this cannot be answered

through one persons set of eyes. The maquiladora factories may be employing thousands of Mexicans, but their wages are ten times less than people paid in the U.S.. A factory worker, working in chemically hazardous environments makes only 75 cents an hour for his risk. Where as in the U.S. the same worker with less chemical hazardous environment ([OSHA](#) laws

enforced) would make \$10 to \$15 an hour.

If we look at the history of mankind, there is a clear pattern of neglect and abuse of our natural resources. Hence we have endangered and extinct species of animals, mutilation of natural land formations, and depletion of water resources. We expect our political leaders to be in charge, and remedy situations such as these, and yet they are not. It is past the time of talking and planning, now is the time to implement an action to restore and recharge the Rio Grande River into a living body of water once again.

The following are only a few thoughts of how to commit to such a challenge.

Successful attention to border area water problems should include management of both the quantity and quality of shared groundwater resources. Such coordination has been difficult so far because: 1) the magnitude of the problems has outpaced efforts for comprehensive management; 2) Mexico has traditionally had less stringent environmental rules and has been lax to enforce them; and 3) the laws regulating groundwater differ fundamentally. In Mexico, as in most of the U.S., groundwater is treated as a common pool or public resource available for reasonable use but is managed and regulated by the government (Eaton and Hurlbut, 1992). In contrast, groundwater is regarded as private property with rights of absolute ownership in most of Texas. The result is that individuals can pump as much water as they want with relatively little regulation. This has the potential to

negatively impact neighboring groundwater users (Kaiser, 1991). Until these differences can be resolved, it will be difficult to effectively manage the shared groundwaters.

At present, only sub-regional water planning activities are conducted by the cities of El Paso, Ciudad Juarez, and Las Cruces. The Regional Council of Governments in West Texas is coordinating an eight-county planning effort in response to a Texas legislative mandate (S.B. 1). The resulting plan will be submitted to the [Texas Water Development Board](#) in 2001. Texas and New Mexico are conducting a joint study of future water demand but no region-wide planning is being done.

Currently all of Juarez's municipal and industrial (M&I) water comes from the Hueco Bolson. Juarez plans to begin pumping the Mesilla Bolson in the near future once a delivery pipeline is complete.

Las Cruces currently pumps all of its M&I water from the Mesilla Bolson. Las Cruces is considering using Rio Grande surface water when the Mesilla does not meet the needs for future growth. This water would have to be transferred from agricultural use to M&I use. Las Cruces has only enough water resources from the Mesilla Bolson for the next twenty years.

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