

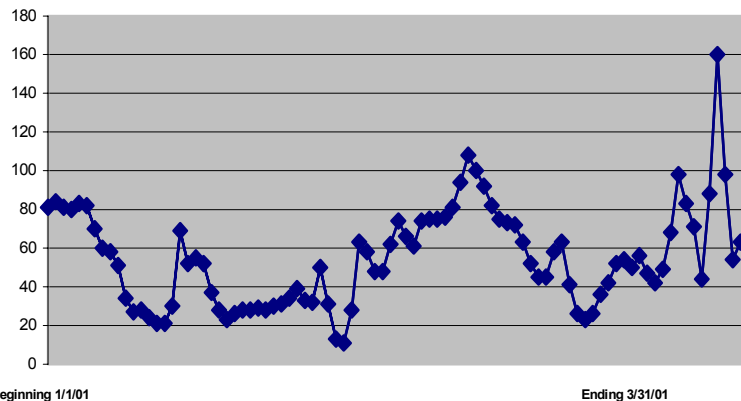
resource processes that sustain fisheries and wildlife habitat.

ENVIRONMENTAL COSTS OF THE WEIR

Along with those mentioned above, natural resource agencies' reviews of the weir proposal point out more problems with the project. The weir will prohibit movement of fish and shellfish species (River goby, freshwater prawn, mullet, etc) upstream, likely increase the distance the existing salt "wedge" extends upstream from the mouth of the river, and may not be able to provide the minimum flow requirement for

downstream water of 25 cubic feet per second over half of the time if Mexican water inputs are reduced. As pointed out earlier, this "extra" Mexican water can no longer be relied upon to be in the river. The effect of reduced instream flows are already manifest in the sandbar that has built up at the mouth of the Rio Grande. The weir will not help alleviate this problem. As the graph below shows, even with recent flows above 25 cfs, the river has not been making it to the Gulf. By further decreasing flows, the weir is likely to make the Boca Chica Sandbar a permanent fixture.

Rio Grande Flows at Brownsville
(cubic feet per second)



Beginning 1/1/01

Ending 3/31/01

Information for this newsletter came from the following sources:

Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission, Rio Grande Watermaster's office (flow data)

The Brownsville Weir: Reality Check, Texas Center for Policy Studies, Mary Kelly, for Texas Rural Legal Aid, November 2000

Region M Regional Water Planning Group *Initially Prepared Regional Water Plan Review Draft*, August 2000

Letter from John Bruciak to Glenn Jarvis, Chair of the Region M Planning Committee dated September 11, 2000

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\$80 million taxpayer dollars

But who really benefits?

An Analysis of the Brownsville Weir and Reservoir Project

May, 2001

T|C|P|S

TEXAS CENTER
FOR POLICY STUDIES

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THE WEIR IS TO ATTRACT INDUSTRY, NOT SUPPLY DRINKING WATER

Brownsville's Public Utilities Board (PUB) has stated many times that the weir will supply the future water demands of Brownsville residents. These demands, however, don't appear to be based on actual future drinking water needs. Projected demand for water—and the assumed justification for building the weir— appears to be based on future, speculative industrial development at the Port of Brownsville. A September 2000 letter from PUB Director John Bruciak to Glenn Jarvis, Chair of the Regional Water Planning Group (RWPG) charged with outlining the region's water needs for the next 50 years, clearly reveals this. The letter states:

... it is important to recognize that the PUB is contractually obligated to serve water to the Brownsville Navigation District and the Port of Brownsville. At the present time there are several major industries that are considering locating new manufacturing facilities near the Brownsville Ship Channel, with significant demands for water. The most serious proposal that is currently being considered by the PUB involves a large industrial complex, with an associated stream-electric power plant and ancillary manufacturing facilities, that has projected water demands on the order of 12,000 to 15,000 acre feet per year...

Few industries use this much water. In fact, that amount would be up to three times the current amount of industrial water use in all eight counties in the planning region. Using limited fresh

water for power plant cooling in a drought-prone region such as the Valley is not sustainable. Since this does appear to be the true purpose of the weir, PUB should make clear to the public the expected economic impact of this development—such as the type of industry being recruited and the number of jobs it is expected to provide—in order for the public to make a more informed decision regarding the true costs and benefits of the weir.

BROWNSVILLE TAXED TWICE

Brownsville ratepayers would foot the bill for the weir, along with state and federal taxpayers if the project receives state or federal funds (the weir has already received a three million dollar appropriation from congress). Ratepayers and taxpayers, therefore, should know that they could be financing development for heavily water intensive industries. It's likely that these industries might be offered tax-abatements and other incentives to attract them to the region, meaning Brownsville residents foot the bill for both the weir and the new industry.

DRINKING WATER DEMAND CAN BE MET FOR THE NEXT 50 YEARS WITHOUT THE WEIR

The Regional Water Planning Group did not originally recommend the weir as a water supply strategy to meet 50-year demand. The RWPG concluded that it was not needed for drinking water supply. Even the PUB admits this in its letter to the committee, saying: *...the full yield of the Brownsville Reservoir is*

not needed to supply the projected demand deficit for Brownsville over the next 50 years. In fact, by using other methods, such as the “non-potable water re-use and supply” strategy, PUB can provide an additional 10,000 acre feet of water by the year 2050—enough to meet drinking water supply needs (estimated to increase to 9,641 acre feet) by 2050. The PUB also says it will try to buy water from willing sellers as Falcon and Amistad rights become available, but it provides no estimate of how much water might be acquired this way, and it is left out of their expected supply scenario. The RWPG estimates that PUB might gain an additional 3,000 acre feet of water per year through acquisition.

Furthermore, PUB says it cannot meet the conservation savings requirements suggested by the RWPG guidelines, but no reason is given as to why Brownsville residents should not be expected to meet the conservation requirements every other citizen in Texas is asked to meet.

THERE MAY BE NO WATER AVAILABLE TO SCALP BY THE TIME, AND IF, THIS PROJECT EVER GETS ON LINE

The Rio Conchos, originating in Chihuahua, Mexico, historically supplied about 75% of the Rio Grande water that reaches the Valley. Right now, Mexico and the U.S. are negotiating agreements that will ensure repayment of Mexico's water “debt” to the U.S., incurred in the past five years. However, the truth is that *except for the past five years*, the U.S. has, since

1944, benefited from more flows in the river from Mexico than it was legally entitled to. The weir is a scalping operation—it can only take water out of the river if extra water is available. If Mexico continues to fully utilize its water rights (as it is entitled to do by treaty) and only supplies flows to the Rio Grande from the Rio Conchos in the amount it is legally obligated to supply, there will likely be much less water available for scalping in the future. This could make the weir an \$80-million-dollar structure with no water to store.

WATER IS NOT BEING “WASTED” OR “UNUSED” AS IT FLOWS INTO THE GULF OF MEXICO

Contrary to what some officials claim, water flowing out past Brownsville and to the Gulf *is* used—by 35 other water rights holders—including irrigators, and by commercial species like Snook and the White Shrimp and Red Drum juveniles that live in the estuary (the zone where freshwater from the Rio Grande and saltwater from the ocean mix), feeding families and fishermen's nets. By simply flowing into the ocean, the river serves a purpose by supplying sediment that is moved through wave action up and along the coast of South Padre Island, helping to prevent erosion of the coastline. This extremely poor choice of words (water being “wasted” or “unused” if it actually makes it to its naturally-intended destination) denotes little respect for the natural processes that have shaped the Rio Grande for millenia. It may be this attitude, more than anything else, that sparks mistrust of the PUB from conservation groups dedicated to protecting the natural