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**Testimony of
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Before the
Water & Power Subcommittee

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Thursday September 9, 2004

Thank you Chairman Ken Calvert and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HR 4775 to amend the Reclamation Wastewater and Groundwater Study and Facilities Act to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to participate in the El Paso, Texas, water reclamation and desalination projects.

My name is Hector Gonzalez, and I am the Business Manager of the El Paso Water Utilities Public Service Board (EPWU). As the Committee knows, EPWU is authorized under Title 16 of the Reclamation Recycling and Water Conservation Act of 1996 to participate in the federal wastewater recycling program. With the support from this Committee, this authorization would expand to include desalination activities along with our reclamation activity.

The City of El Paso, Texas, with a population of 594,000 is the sixth largest City in the State. Located on the border with the City of Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico, the combined population of the area is well over 2 million. The estimated population within this region is expected to more than double within the next 20 years. Concurrent with the region's population boom is the depletion of its local aquifers. These underground water sources provide the cities of Las Cruces, New Mexico and Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico with 100 percent of their water needs, and El Paso with 50 percent of our total water supply. Previous estimates indicated that the City of El Paso could run out of fresh water from the Hueco Bolson aquifer within the next twenty-five years if alternative water supplies are not fully developed and the City of Juarez could have serious fresh water supply shortages if alternative supplies are not fully developed. More recent groundwater studies indicate that current groundwater flow conditions and patterns including saline water are expected to more effectively utilize capacity of the Hueco Bolson.

During the past 10 years, the El Paso Water Utilities has been a leader in water management to include desalination and reclamation efforts in El Paso County. The Utility has also been very aggressive and successful in water conservation. Recent studies prepared by the U.S. Geological Service have determined that the groundwater supplies within the El Paso region can be managed to provide for long-term sustainable water supplies to exist. Such scenarios are possible, provided various management strategies are implemented and funding is made available to provide for the development of desalination facilities and an expanded water reclamation program. This is the reason that we urge the passage of HR 4775.

Previous funding approvals for our desalination project, water reclamation, and planning related issues have all helped ensure that EPWU continues to secure alternative sources of supply. However, EPWU's total capital improvement needs over the next 10 years will total over \$800 million which will translate into a 30-50% increase in water rates. With El Paso's median household income of approximately \$29,900 per year, and 36 percent of the children under 18 below the poverty level, the end result will place an overwhelming burden on our rate payers.

Desalination Project

The El Paso Water Utilities and Fort Bliss, Texas joint desalination facility will treat brackish groundwater and provide additional water supplies to the City of El Paso as well as the Fort Bliss military base. Plans are

for an initial membrane treatment capacity of approximately 15 million gallons per day (mgd) of desalinated water, to be blended with additional brackish water to produce an initial flow stream of 27.5 mgd of product water, making it the largest inland desalination plant in the world. The total estimated cost for this facility along with production wells is \$72 million. Local monies have already been used to complete the planning and design phases of the project.

Funding approvals during the last three years have helped us complete the design efforts, and construction is scheduled to begin at the beginning of next year. On Wednesday of this week, a public hearing was held in El Paso as part of the environmental process. The Plant is expected to be online by the Fall of 2006. Support from the Committee to amend the current Reclamation and Groundwater Study and Facilities Act will permit the City to seek additional funding and allow the project to continue to move forward and into construction without placing an undue hardship on our ratepayers.

To assure sustainability beyond the Ft. Bliss project, El Paso will have to pursue within the next 10-15 years more desalination projects through a combination of additional local area desalination and importing water from locations 100 miles or more to the east of El Paso.

Desalination of brackish groundwater will benefit the citizens of the City of El Paso and also serve as a catalyst for the possible development of similar project(s) within the region, including the City of Juarez.

Water Reclamation

Reclaimed water is recycled wastewater that has received advanced treatment to improve its quality. It can be used in many applications that do not require potable (drinkable) water, including landscape irrigation, industrial processes including cooling, and construction projects. The greatest value of reclaimed water is the reduction of potable water peak demand and drought protection.

As a pioneer in water reclamation, El Paso Water Utilities has received international recognition for its water reuse. EPWU first delivered reclaimed water to the community in the late 1950's.

Today, an extensive distribution system carries reclaimed water from our four wastewater plants to sites throughout El Paso. In 2003, EPWU reclaimed 3.7 billion gallons of wastewater, an amount equal to 11 percent of our water demand. Our goal is to reclaim 17% by the year 2010.

Under the Reclamation authority that we currently have, we are planning the expansion of our reclamation plant to provide Fort Bliss with reclaimed water for its parade grounds, cemeteries and parks.

In addition, the EPWU is in the process of expanding the reclaimed water service area for the Roberto Bustamante Wastewater Treatment Plant. The existing reclaimed water system is designed to produce 2 MGD of reclaimed water. EPWU has design plans to extend service to large irrigation-water customers such as an 80 acre cemetery, parks and schools under the first phase. The estimated cost for Phase one is \$1.41 million by 2006. The Bustamante Plant Phase II is intended to serve parks and schools further northwest at the same time the reclaimed water supply and treatment infrastructure is expanded at an estimated cost of \$8.86 million by 2006. Finally, Phase III is intended to serve the areas adjacent to the interstate at a cost of \$2.2 million.

Once again, I would like to thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HR 4775, and also wish to thank Congressman Reyes for his leadership in introducing and supporting this legislation.

I applaud the Chairman and ranking member for your vision in pressing for a federal commitment in desalination programs. Development of water supplies and water re-use is a partnership of local, state, and federal governments.