

Mary Lou Campbell, testimony

**The Honorable Ken Calvert
Chairman
Subcommittee on Water and Power
Committee on Resources
U.S. House of Representatives
1328 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515**

**Chairman Calvert
Members of the Committee
Honored Guests**

It is my privilege and duty to come before you today to share my thoughts on the subject at hand - Lower Rio Grande River Water Security - Opportunities and Challenges. I am speaking today on behalf of Sierra Club and Frontera Audubon Society, although I am a member of many local, state and national organizations having the well-being of our environment as their goal. It is important to note that I represent the environmental community on Region M, Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group.

Here in the Lower Valley of Texas the once mighty Rio Grande has been reduced to a mere trickle that cannot reach the Gulf of Mexico. A sand bar has closed the mouth of this river estuary. The torrent that once carried sand and gravel, yes, even flecks of gold ore, to build and replenish our Gulf of Mexico beaches is no more. The Rio has been dammed and diverted, over-used and blocked by invasive, introduced varieties of plants and trees. The water that once flowed from the Sangre de Cristo Range of Colorado and New Mexico no longer reaches the Valley. We must depend on the Pecos and a few small tributaries from the United States. The principal source of water for the Lower Rio Grande comes from Mexico - the Rios Conchos, San Juan, Salado and others. The major rivers have dams on them to supply Mexico's burgeoning population and industrial growth. (Much of it the result of NAFTA policies.) This growth, compounded by a major drought in Northern Mexico, leaves little water for South Texas. Even if Mexico would or could pay the due portion of the Treaty of 1944 debt, this water would not solve our long term problems. I would like to join others who have suggested that we turn this seeming impasse into an opportunity to work with Mexico on water planning for the future of both nations.

Although Texas Senate Bill One suggests a fifty-year horizon for the purpose of water planning for Texans, the members of the committee of Region M must deal with the realities of here and now. We are in the process of amending our original plan to more properly reflect the changes and challenges that we see. To be effective the plan must be a living document. The municipalities have first call on water so long as it is available, in reality the municipal and irrigation users must depend on each other. The cities and towns do not all have pump stations on the river, so some must rely on irrigation transport to get their water to them. The Region M plan calls for an aggressive approach to water conservation and use and reuse by municipalities, thus making more water available in the system. Part of conservation is also the updating of lines and meters within the towns so that the system can operate with minimal water loss.

Not only must we think of water conservation, we must look for new sources of water. This strategy must include desalination of both ground water and sea water. There are several small programs running on desalination of ground water, with more planned as we learn about sources of supply. The Texas Water Development Board is currently working on a Ground Water Availability Report for our area. The coastal regional water planning groups, in order to optimize available resources, are working together to plan for desalination of sea water. Certainly, desalination of sea water is a viable option. The region is located on the Gulf of Mexico. We believe that problems of cost and waste disposal can be worked out for an efficient and bountiful supply of water not only for our coastal communities, but, in time, for the entire Valley.

Prior to Senate Bill One, which established the regional planning groups, the lower Rio Grande Valley formed a water planning group. That group was the nucleus for Region M. Key to the plan were improvements to the irrigation canal delivery system and on farm conservation. This is as true today as it was in 1996, when the group first met. Some of

the improvements identified were:

Improvements to irrigation canals, many are very old with cracked concrete linings, leaks, breaks etc

Application of region wide on-farm metering and volumetric pricing

Installation of on-farm high-tech application methods

Training for on-farm high-tech management

Non-agricultural water conservation

Impacts of urbanization on irrigation water requirements

Region-wide water accounting system for accurate measurement of the Water Conservation Projects

SCADA System to more effectively monitor and manage the delivery of water from the Falcon-Amistad Reservoir system to the Lower

Rio Grande Valley

While we recognize that this is a very impressive list of improvements, we believe that they are essential to the long term viability of agriculture in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We have been noted and still are a "bread-basket" to the world. However, without water-saving improvements to our water systems, we will no longer be able to sustain that place and honor. The committee acknowledges the help of the United States Agricultural Research Center in Weslaco, the Texas Agricultural Extension Service of the Texas A&M University System in Weslaco and the Department of Agricultural Sciences of Texas A&M University of College Station, Texas in planning. We will depend upon them for help in training for the implementation of these water saving methods.

I ask for your support of H.R.2990 and the amendments thereto that pertain to the viability of agriculture in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

As a volunteer for the environment, I believe that human and wildlife values for water are of equal importance. Some of our plants and animals live in a water dependent locale, others need only access to water for drinking or food source and yet others can thrive in an arid atmosphere. Yet, they all need some type of moisture, if only limited to the occasional drop of dew. We must consider wildlife and their habitat in our planning for water. One thought would be to ensure adequate freshwater flows in the river. On the United States side almost none of the water taken from the river is returned whether for domestic or on-farm use. In Mexico, much of what is returned is not treated and may even prove a risk to both man and animals. The (once and future) estuary at the mouth of the river is an important nursery for white shrimp, bait fish and sportfish, namely snook. The bays and estuaries of Texas are a multimillion dollar nursery ground for the Gulf of Mexico.

In the past the leaking canals and wide-spread use of "flood irrigation", proved to be a source of water for wildlife. Other than the Rio Grande and the Arroyo Colorado, we do not have springs and streams in the lower valley, so the wildlife has become dependent on canals, livestock tanks and overflow of antiquated irrigation towers. Many of our species have "moved to town" where a source of fresh water is often the runoff from lawn watering and car washing. Recognition is growing throughout the valley of the value of native birds, plants and animals. Nature parks and nature trails are being established. Texas Parks and Wildlife has established the regional birding trails. Again under the umbrella of Texas Parks and Wildlife a Texas Birding Center is being built in the Valley with satellite centers in seven valley cities. A National Butterfly Center is planned for Mission.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service manages three National Wildlife Refuges: Santa Ana, Laguna Atascosa and Lower Rio Grande.

These refuges, when completed, will establish a wildlife corridor along the Rio Grande from Boca Chica Beach to Roma and Rio Grande City. In addition Laguna Atascosa has both beach and bay habitat for bird and animal and plant species. These three refuges represent millions of dollars worth of expenditures both to buy and maintain. They are an important part of the economy to the Valley. We are learning that hunters and fishers, birders and hikers bring new dollars.

Tourism is the third largest industry in Texas. Nature tourism is the fastest growing sector of the tourism industry. Wildlife watching is the Number One sport in the United States, with birding the fastest growing hobby. Texas is the Number One birding destination in the United States. The Rio Grande Valley is the Number One birding destination in Texas, with over 500 species sighted, including more than 40 rare or endangered species. Over 200,000 people come to watch birds and wildlife every year, accounting for more than \$100 million in spending. Using a multiplier effect of 1.7, wildlife watching accounts for over \$170 million in local economic impact annually. Nature tourism in the Valley sustains over 2,000 jobs and accounts for approximately \$100,000 per year in local spending. It is essential that we

have enough water to maintain habitat.

For the above and other good reasons that others will testify to, we ask for funding so that the Valley will continue to thrive and that we who live here can use our resource both wisely and well.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, Mary Lou Campbell

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