

Committee on Resources

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Testimony of
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of the
Brownsville Public Utilities Board
Brownsville, Texas
before the
House of Representatives
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Water and Power

July 24, 2003

Good afternoon Chairman Calvert and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. My name is Eduardo A. Campirano and I the Assistant General Manager and Chief Operating Officer of the Brownsville Public Utilities Board in Brownsville, Texas.

The Brownsville Public Utilities Board is a municipally owned utility company providing electric, water and wastewater services to the citizens of Brownsville, Texas and the surrounding area. Brownsville is located on the southern tip of Texas along the US/Mexico border, and is currently one of the fastest growing metropolitan statistical areas (MSA) in the United States. The Brownsville MSA experienced a 30 % population growth from 1990 - 2000 with a fairly young population, where the median age is 29. The area has experienced significant growth on both sides of the US/Mexico border and Brownsville in particular is experiencing unprecedented growth.

This growth poses significant challenges to the Brownsville Public Utilities Board. With the increased issuance of building permits and the increased demand placed on the utility systems, there is a tremendous demand for infrastructure improvements and additional water supply. Brownsville and other communities in the Lower Rio Grande Valley have been working together with the State of Texas and the Mexican State of Tamaulipas to solve our need to ensure our long-term water supply. This is the top environmental and quality of life issue for the entire region.

The Brownsville Public Utilities Board has developed a water supply plan that projects the demand and supply of water for the City of Brownsville for the period of 2000 - 2050. At the current rate, water demand will deplete supply by the year 2010. However, we have not been idle in planning for our future water needs. The water supply plan incorporates various elements including water conservation, increased surface water capacity, groundwater treatment and development, water reclamation and desalination. However, employing these strategies is dependent on implementation of legislative and funding recommendations.

Several years ago, the Brownsville Public Utilities Board began planning the construction of the Brownsville Weir and Reservoir Project between the US and Mexico on the Rio Grande River. The concrete/gated weir structure will create riverine impoundment of water within the banks of the Rio Grande River located approximately four (4) miles southeast of the City of Brownsville. The project can store up to 6,000 acre feet of water consisting of flood spills and releases from Falcon Reservoir, excess and unused releases from Falcon Reservoir, flood flows below Falcon Reservoir and Mexican water flow with Mexico's permission. The Brownsville Public Utilities Board is in the final stages of securing federal approval under the Section 404 permit of the US Army Corps of Engineers. The project cost is estimated to be \$40 million and significant funds have been spent to date to get the project through state and federal permit processes. As you very well know, gaining the support of interest groups and guiding the project through permitting can be a very challenging task. It has been very frustrating to move the project through the maze of federal and state reviews, but we are near our goal.

I am here today to testify about the importance of a federal and local partnership to plan, design and construct wastewater reclamation and desalination facilities. We know from our involvement in various associations and through professional contacts that the federal Title XVI Program and desalination funding have helped western water utilities make the best use of their available water resources. The Brownsville Public Utilities Board has received some planning assistance from the Bureau of Reclamation over the past two (2) years to plan a wastewater reclamation project. We have also asked Congressman Solomon P. Ortiz to introduce some legislation to authorize the Brownsville Public Utilities Board to seek federal funds to match our 75% local share. We are currently exploring the potential for using reclaimed wastewater for an industrial prospect and this type of funding partnership is an excellent arrangement for both parties.

In addition to wastewater reclamation, the Brownsville Public Utilities Board is very interested in federal desalination efforts. As I stated earlier in my remarks, we believe desalination is another viable option for meeting our water supply needs. Brownsville has substantial impaired groundwater and our location provides strategic access to seawater, both of which are essential to our future water supply strategies. We have two (2) projects underway that utilize these water supply strategies.

We are in the process of constructing a regional brackish groundwater desalination facility. This project provides for the deployment of a water supply that is a source of water independent of the Rio Grande River, and is not subject to water rights purchases. This project does not have the prohibitive environmental, capital and operating costs of a seawater desalination facility while at the same time developing a water supply that is drought tolerant and provides for an improved water supply. Phase I of the project will produce 7.5 million gallons of water per day, with Phase II expected to double production of high quality water. We believe that Phase II will create the greatest opportunity to secure federal participation in this project.

In April of this year, the Governor of Texas tasked the Texas Water Development Board with developing a recommendation for a large-scale demonstration seawater desalination project. This initiative resolves to add large-scale seawater desalination to the mix of water supply sources to meet the long-term water supply needs of various regions of the state, as well as applying technologies that can be feasibly implemented in Texas. Brownsville is one of three proposed projects. Again, we believe this provides a great opportunity for federal participation.

I understand that there is significant interest in Title XVI, desalination research and project construction. I know that over the past ten (10) years, the Federal government has funded wastewater reclamation projects. While it might appear that a substantial amount of federal funds have been invested in reclamation projects, it pales in comparison to the water supply needs being experienced throughout various regions of the United States. As you are aware from your recent hearings, there is a very critical need to develop water supplies in growing areas of the country and in regions experiencing severe drought conditions. The Congress and the Administration should expand the funding for programs such as the Title XVI program and desalination efforts.

Before closing, I would like to commend this Subcommittee for holding this hearing and providing the Brownsville Public Utilities Board an opportunity to present testimony on these issues. I did not present, nor do I have, a strong position regarding the method for federal funding for reclamation or desalination projects. I know that many projects are earmarked in the appropriations process, and that process favors certain projects. The Brownsville Public Utilities Board believes that it could successfully compete in competitive grant approach. However, the difficulty with a competitive grant approach is the amount of funding that is made available to a particular program.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear at this hearing. I commend you for your efforts and I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.