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*Comments by Wayne Halbert to the Subcommittee on Water and Power of the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Resources*

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Mr. Chairman, Committee Members and staff, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today on behalf of the communities and water districts along the Texas Border. I am Wayne Halbert, General Manager of the Harlingen Irrigation District and represent irrigation districts that supply irrigation water to over a million acres of farmland and raw water to municipalities for over 1.5 million people. Our testimony is in support of H.R. 2990, which amends the Lower Rio Grande Valley Resources Conservation and Improvement Act of 2000, to authorize additional projects under that Act, and for other purposes.

For the past several years the Border Region has been deeply involved in Integrated Resource Management studies to determine a direction for our communities to take in water resource management. The State of Texas gave direction to these studies in 1997 with legislation that required even more comprehensive determinations of water resource status. These studies have given us some stark revelations as to unprecedented predictions in population growth and needs for water resources over the next few years. The Rio Grande Valley Irrigation Districts have partnered with the Bureau of Reclamation on projects since the early 1950's. Most of the Districts have utilized BOR loan programs to do conservation projects. Many developed projects remain undone due to a lack of funding available to meet the needs. Districts have systematically chipped away at these projects within their budget restraints.

Various changes in the water resource condition have made this slow progress unacceptable and has placed the agricultural and municipal supply needs in peril. Drier than normal conditions over the past nine years have exhausted water supplies and caused thousands of acres of land to become unproductive and unable to sustain the industry that depends on that production. Explosive developments in Mexico, which share the waters of the Rio Grande, have deprived the United States of a greater amount of the water resource, accelerating the crisis. Admittedly a part of the Mexico issue is drought related but a greater part is a change in Mexico's operations of their system that has deprived the US users of over a year's supply of water and placed Mexico in violation of the terms of the 1944 Water Treaty.

The population explosion in the Rio Grande Valley area is escalated by the massive legal and illegal migration from Mexico for which Congress continues to struggle with solutions even today. As if our population problems are not enough, Mexico's along the border are many times worse and they draw from the same resource.

All of these pressures turn up the heat on the water resources for the Rio Grande. Today you have heard valid concerns and frustrations over various issues that we desperately need congressional help with, but we also want to offer you a blue print for at least some of the solutions.

In the comprehensive water resource studies of which you have been provided testimony today, an emphasis was made to seek solutions that would provide balance to the fragile economy and environment of the border region. The committees and consultants were charged with the responsibility of finding ways to provide an adequate water supply for the least amount of impact, both financial and physical. Our goal was to find enough firm yield water to provide for the municipal, industrial, environmental and agricultural needs of the region and to dovetail that plan into the expected growth needs of the Valley.

The studies looked at desalinization, reverse osmosis, runoff reuse, groundwater recovery, new dam sites, long distance pipelines and any other opportunity that presented any semblance of credible water supply. After several years of study it has become apparent that because agriculture uses 85% of the water available, agriculture must be the target for the major water conservation projects.

H.R. 2990 provides the authorization for the Bureau of Reclamation to implement the programs and projects that surfaced as the most cost effective way to provide for the water resource needs of the Texas Border region. Most of the irrigation systems were built in the early 1900's and many of the delivery systems that are the lifeblood of the municipalities as well as agriculture must be renovated. Improvements to these canals would provide annually one half of a years current municipal needs in saved water. Other conservation projects that include volumetric accounting of the water and new technologies in water delivery could save another 75% of the municipal current annual needs. All of these projects can be accomplished for construction costs of from \$0.02 to \$3.07 per 1000 gallons which projects on a debt service basis from a fraction of a cent to \$0.23 per 1000 gallons of water saved. The projects outlined in this legislation could more than double the water available for municipal and industrial use without collapsing the agricultural economy.

The agricultural economy is extremely important to our region as a large portion of the workforce is dependent on the agriculture industry. The Border aspects of the region only increases this problem and agricultural layoffs create immediate social problems far beyond the normal expectations. We testified a couple of years ago that an undependable water supply could do irreparable damage and would push our local unemployment figures out of sight. We now have a report from Texas A&M that estimates as many as 30,000 jobs have been lost over the past nine years directly related to the water shortage on the Mexico shortfall alone.

The importance of this legislation has only been accelerated by the past several years drought condition and recent information that indicate explosive demands in Mexico on the water resource. We recognize that we may have to live and grow on less water than we have been accustomed to. The latest work by Texas A&M University economist have documented losses approaching one billion dollars over the past nine years attributable solely to Mexico's withholding of water from the

four county region of the Lower Rio Grande Valley. We continue to lose farms and businesses that have been a part of the Rio Grande Valley heritage for over a hundred years, mostly because water resource demands the past seven years have been inadequate. The greatest impacts of these losses today are to our agricultural community; however, the associated impacts are beginning to take their toll to the Border Region as a whole. The cost of water to the general public is on the rise and will continue to do so as the scarcity of the resource manifests itself. Water shortages to the general populace have been held to a minimum but we are rapidly approaching a crisis in this arena also.

This legislation allows us to turn these tragic losses around and provide new life and new hope to the whole Rio Grande Border Region. The infrastructure that is needed to solve these problems is apparent. Districts have planned these needed projects for years and anticipated accomplishing them over the next twenty or so years. Testimony today has shown you that we do not have that luxury. Every few acre feet of water not conserved is another family farm gone, another few jobs lost, another business who had to close their doors. Our future is in your hands.

We appreciate your support for H.R. 2990. Thank you for your attention.

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