

Testimony of
Carlos Marin
Acting United States Commissioner

International Boundary and Water Commission
United States and Mexico

Before the House Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Water and Power

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am pleased to come before you today to present this testimony concerning H. R. 862, a bill to redesignate the Rio Grande American Canal in El Paso, Texas, as the "Travis C. Johnson Canal." Travis C. Johnson is a prominent citizen of El Paso, Texas, which is also the headquarters to the U.S. Section of the International Boundary and Water Commission (IBWC). While we recognize that the redesignation of the Rio Grande American Canal lies within the prerogative of the Congress, as a fellow Texan, I personally commend Mr. Johnson for his civic activism and notable contributions to the greater El Paso community. Mr. Johnson has an extensive record of public service including service as a Member of the Advisory Council of the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC), in which capacity he worked very closely with the IBWC, which at that time was on the BECC Board of Directors. Mr. Johnson was also a member of the Governor's Council on Water for Texas and was the recipient of an Honor Award from the National Water Resources Association. Subject to the availability of necessary resources, if this bill is enacted, the U. S. Section of IBWC, which maintains and operates the American Dam and American Canal, will move expeditiously to reflect the redesignation in its maps, hydrological data, and web site references.

By way of background, I would like to speak for a minute about the International Boundary and Water Commission and the reason the Rio Grande American Dam and American Canal were constructed. The IBWC is a binational treaty-based organization that is charged by the United States and Mexican Governments with applying U.S.-Mexico boundary and water allocation treaties. Dating from their early treaties of peace and friendship, the United States and Mexico agreed that the international boundary would run through the middle of the Rio Grande and Colorado River and that these transboundary rivers would remain free to navigation by the citizens of both nations. There was no attempt to distribute the water of their shared rivers until the construction of railroads brought increased settlement to the West in the late nineteenth century and more land was put into agricultural production on both sides of the border. The International Boundary Commission, the predecessor to the IBWC, was instrumental in preparing the hydrological studies which formed the basis for the first water allocation treaty between the United States and Mexico, which was concluded in 1906.

Under the 1906 Convention, the United States agreed to deliver to Mexico 60,000 acre-feet of water annually to the Old Mexican Canal above the city of Juarez, Mexico, as nearly as possible in accordance with a monthly schedule set forth within the Convention. In practice, as a matter of comity, the United States and Mexico have made modifications to the schedule of deliveries through an annual exchange of diplomatic notes, based upon the recommendations of the IBWC, to afford Mexico water deliveries that best meet the needs of the farmers of the Juarez Valley. The 1906 Convention provided that in the case of extraordinary drought or accident to the irrigation system in the United States, the United States would reduce its water delivery to Mexico in the same proportion as that reduced to its domestic users. The Convention provided that the water deliveries were to be made without cost to Mexico and that the United States would pay the cost to construct upstream dams required to regulate and store such volumes. Mexico agreed to waive its rights to the waters of the Rio Grande between the Mexican Canal and Fort Quitman, Texas.

The U.S. Section of IBWC has constructed, operates and maintains the Rio Grande Canalization Project to facilitate compliance with the 1906 Convention and to provide flood protection. This project extends 106 miles along the Rio Grande from Percha Dam, New Mexico downstream to American Dam in El Paso Texas. Constructed between 1938 and 1943, the project has a normal flow channel, a floodway, 130 miles of flood control levees and 27 bridges.

In order to regulate the quantity of water delivered to U.S. irrigators and to Mexico under the 1906 Convention, in 1935 Congress authorized the construction of the American Dam and the American Canal. These structures were built between 1937 and 1938. The American Dam is located on the Rio Grande about 3.5 miles upstream from the business center of El Paso, Texas and about 140 feet above the point of the beginning of the Western Land Boundary between the United States and Mexico. The original American Canal extends two miles downstream from the dam before connecting to the new Rio Grande American Canal Extension, a new 12-mile concrete-lined canal that was constructed in the 1990s to assure delivery of water to irrigators and conserve water that otherwise would be lost to seepage and evaporation. At American Dam, USIBWC personnel divert U.S. waters to the American Canal for the benefit of lower El Paso Valley irrigators and release the waters allotted to Mexico under the 1906 Convention downstream to the Rio Grande.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you or other members of the Committee may have.

Drafted by: WHA/MEX – Mary M. Brandt

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H – James Hagan – ok

USIBWC – Carlos Marin – ok

USIBWC/FAO – Sally Spener – ok

USIBWC – Ken Rakestraw - ok