

Colorado River Delta Water Users See Red

By Talli Nauman | December 6, 2005

“Agriculture Grows Yuma,” says a lighted billboard on Interstate 8 not far from the northern border town of San Luis Rio Colorado, Sonora. What grows the agriculture is the water from the river that gives the Mexican border town its name, the bi-national Colorado River.

While Yuma and the agriculture in California’s Imperial Valley have been growing, however, the river has been shrinking, and with it, the economic development possibilities of everybody living from San Luis south all the way to the mouth of the channel.

Some agribusiness interests think the irrigation is the only valid use for the river water. They look at a river flowing and see a waste of the precious liquid. But watering crops with Colorado flows for years has created salty chemical runoffs that pollute it beyond recognition, and many folks would like to conserve the water for other ends.

In fairness, of course, agribusiness is not entirely to blame for the paucity and degradation of Colorado River water. Hydroelectric dams all along its course, as well as industrial and municipal demands of the arid U.S. Pacific Southwest, take their toll.

The point is that fishing, hunting, birding, boating, tourism, and other longtime socioeconomic activities in Baja California have gotten the short end of the stick when it comes to measuring their share of the Colorado’s wealth. More often than not, the only water they still receive is what’s left in the drainage from grain and vegetable fields.

So, many residents of the Colorado River Delta, at the northern end of the Gulf of California, are staking their lives on securing greater allocations of fresh water from the river for their use in downstream habitat restoration. Their efforts have congealed in the multi-sector binational Colorado River Delta Project, undertaken by water users, researchers, and non-governmental organizations several years ago. Now they are garnering the

attention of key civil servants who can incorporate their ideas into institutional planning.

For example, officials met with project participants in Mexicali, Baja California, on Dec. 2 to hash out a Community Management Plan for the Hardy River tributary to the Colorado. The non-profit Hardy-Colorado River Users Ecological Association is requesting the authority to manage and restore an abandoned campground operation currently under the National Water Commission’s auspices.

Another mechanism being unveiled is that of water conservation easements. The environmental group Pronatura has been squirreling away money in its San Luis office to make the purchase of the first such easement. Now a farmer has agreed to sell his water rights to the group in the first of what activists hope will be many transactions for the new Colorado River Delta Water Trust.

The Tucson, AZ-based Sonoran Institute, which has helped coordinate the water easement framework, expects the first papers to be signed within the month. Then users will proceed with a demonstration site for reforestation of native trees after removing invasive salt cedar, irrigation of the seedlings, then putting the water into the river course.

The initiative is spurring the Mexican National Ecology Institute to hone regulations defining water rights not only for conventional agricultural purposes but also for conservation’s economic benefits. Meanwhile, groundwater modeling, soil testing, and bird monitoring are providing the analysis for planting of mesquite, alamo, and other trees this March.



These devices will all help implement in practice the UNESCO designation earlier this year of the Gulf of California as a World Heritage Site, as well as the Mexican federal government's evolving ecological land-use plan for the entire gulf area.

They will boost opportunities for increasing fish stocks for subsistence, sport, and commercial purposes, while multiplying ways to make a living through ecotourism.

What's more they serve as models of community-based development compatible with conservation that can be replicated not only in the area, but nationwide.

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