

Cross-Border Joint-Management Tool Could Set Trend-- Paso del Norte Water Task Force Fills Void

Rachel McHugh | August 15, 2005

Water scarcity is a vital consideration for many communities in the Americas. Concerns about water availability in arid and desert areas such as the U.S. Southwest, Northern Mexico, and the Chile-Argentina border are compounded by drought conditions, as well as intensifying trade and development demands. People of these thirsty lands are worried about running out of water for drinking, irrigating farms, watering livestock, and running industries, not to mention for healthy environmental conditions. Along the U.S.-Mexico border, the imminent threat involves water sources that cross state and national boundaries.

Authorities and other citizens in both nations are attempting to prioritize use, map availability, and change the way water is managed. The obstacles they face are significant, and cooperation can be difficult. One group, the Paso del Norte Water Task Force, is making particularly long strides in responding to the issues: Its efforts in the Las Cruces-El Paso-Ciudad Juarez areas of New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua states could help other organizations along the border and throughout the hemisphere see alternatives and find solutions.

The Paso del Norte Water Task Force brings together water managers, users, experts, and other citizens to advance water's role in the sustainability and prosperity of the tri-city, or Paso del Norte, area of the U.S.-Mexican border. At the core of its goals is promotion of a tri-state, bi-national perspective. The task force actively encourages information and water management technique sharing. In setting priorities for water use projects in the Paso del Norte, the task force relies on the principle of collaboration. Its main projects are: planning, including a Regional Water Plan; transfer practices and concerns; assessing supply; conservation initiatives, and technical studies and reports.

With growth, drought, agriculture, and natural environment pressures, task force members are increasingly aware that something has got to give. The question becomes: Who determines compromise and how do citizens prepare for the result? The task force has established that supply is a primary issue and knowledge about availability is a dominant factor, both in the Paso del Norte and the greater U.S.-Mexico border area. Related issues, such as quality and pollutants are also of concern. However, difficulties arise in trying to determine

adequate quality without knowing what water is available and what it will be used for. By setting this and other priorities the task force has a potential to improve management efficiency within and between local planning authorities and agencies throughout the region.

The task force first met in April 1999, having formed out of the Hewlett Initiative undertaken the previous year. The participants in the initiative were New Mexico State University, *Universidad de Ciudad Juárez*, and the Houston Advanced Research Center. Their intent was to fill a void in sustainable water management in the triangle of Paso del Norte. The original participants are still actively involved in the task force, while representation has grown to include diverse organizations and authorities. Among them are irrigation districts, municipal utilities, the non-profit Environmental Defense Fund, and unaffiliated Paso del Norte citizens. Today the group has about 32 member organizations and individuals.

Task Force Faces Off Challenges

The situation faced by this tri-state locale has long been a fight for control of and rights to use water. Water conflict has caused so much tension that the states have sued one another over it.

The pressure on authorities to diversify water sources and find new ways to meet water demand will only continue to increase as concern grows over availability. Drought, heavily allocated surface water, and increasing water needs have placed serious stress on supplies.

The cities of Las Cruces, El Paso, and Ciudad Juarez, along with their surrounding areas provide a microcosm of the border area's water concerns. Population and



industrial growth rates in the metropolis outpace the national averages of Mexico and the United States. More than 2 million people in the Paso del Norte traditionally rely on groundwater for their necessities.

The focus of demand has been changing from agriculturally dominated concerns to municipal-industrial uses. Allocation of surface water in the past was predominantly based on irrigation needs. Meanwhile, municipalities have been bearing down on groundwater, albeit with erratic monitoring. El Paso and Las Cruces use the lion's share of their water for domestic purposes. At the same time, industrial demand has been consistently rising in Ciudad Juarez, where conventional water conservation efforts have been somewhat less effective than in the other two cities.

Like Las Cruces, El Paso, and Ciudad Juarez, many small municipalities in the Paso area are dependent on groundwater. El Paso and Ciudad Juarez get the majority of their municipal water from a single source, the Hueco Bolson. El Paso has considered water from the Mesilla Bolson as well, but the aquifer lies mostly across the state line in New Mexico.

Both cities are looking into importing water from other areas. The transfer process involves a complex set of water laws, allocation systems, compacts, and other legal considerations. The growth and water demand trends are certain to continue.

Trying to reach a necessary level of cooperation in this situation is complicated by long-standing river compacts, old treaties, three distinct states with differing water policies, two nations with varied controls, one bi-national organization for surface water, insufficient groundwater data, and a myriad of conflicting views.

Attributes of Task Force Compelling

The creation of the task force marked the advent of an organized non-governmental forum for joint studies, outreach activities, and direct policy recommendations. What makes the task force effective is citizen participation, diversity of membership, maintaining small size, direct focus on an identified area, and recommendations that are formed with involvement from the people making management decisions.

Participation of the combination of geographically-related independent citizens, authorities, and representatives of varied groups lends to effectiveness and influence by

keeping the discussion broad and the concerns centered on the defined Paso area.

The task force has brought together members of the public within the Paso and adjacent communities to take action that consists of forming strategies, discussing issues and solutions, and influencing the recommendations to government agencies. Through this process, the task force has found a way of initiating necessary changes among the authorities directly responsible for setting water policy and managing water resources.

The task force maintains hands-on participation of local decision-makers, with a system including three co-chairs, one from each state of Chihuahua, Texas, and New Mexico, who take turns presiding for six-month periods.

The task force sees to it that all levels of water managers (city, county, and irrigation district) from Las Cruces, El Paso, and Ciudad Juarez meet and talk.

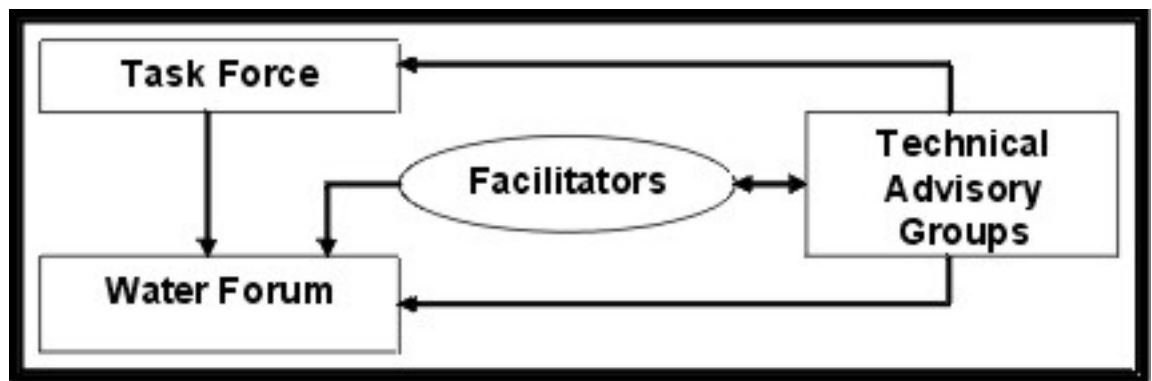
The participation of residents from both inside and just outside the tri-city area is important in the Paso del Norte, because the cities dominate the scene, use the most municipal water, and impact the communities and farms surrounding them.

Positive Mechanisms: How It Works in Paso del Norte

The task force is continually working with stakeholders and interested parties to collect and disseminate information, shape objectives, and reach accords on strategies for specific water issues. The task force has made community involvement and education a part of water planning and conservation. Workshops, field trips, and the publication of cooperative studies engage the public. Increasing participation in the future is the way the task force aims to build ongoing commitment to cooperative dialogue.

In addition to the activities of full task force, the organization maintains Technical Advisory Groups, Facilitators, and a Water Forum. (See flow chart, page 3.) This structure is remarkable in its ability to effectively expand active participation and dialogue. The framework compels officials to act by including them as full members responsible for taking part in the different facets of the organization. The full task force has meetings four times a year. The interaction between guests and representatives of standing member associations increases the chance that a broad range of views is taken into consideration.

Individuals and representatives of outside organizations also are invited to join with regular members in discussions of the Technical Advisory Groups and the Water Forum. The members of the Technical Advisory Groups, together with the



Courtesy of Houston Advanced Research Center, Mitchell Center for Sustainable Development

Facilitators, guarantee a solid basis for discussions and activities by assuring accurate information, which for water issues is highly technical. Group members offering the technical support are local and regional researchers from institutions, such as the Water Resource Research Institute (WRI) at New Mexico State University (NMSU), the Environmental Defense Fund, and the *Centro de Información Geográfica* at the *Universidad Autónoma de Ciudad Juárez*.

The Water Forum brings together authorities, organization representatives, and other residents who share concerns and chart strategies. The forum agendas include public workshops whenever possible to obtain community feedback on new studies and proposed recommendations that will be presented to decision-makers. Another important function of the Water Forum is public education. Facilitators help with outreach. They are charged not only with administration of the operational structure but also with conveying task force goals to general and specific audiences.

Each of the task force pieces fits with the others to result in comprehensive recommendations tailored specifically for the Paso del Norte.

Ongoing task force conversations turn into formal studies and planning techniques with a frequency worthy of note. One technique that has evolved out of task force efforts is cross-boundary field trips.

The first task force publication, which was based on the work plan of 1999, came out in 2001. Entitled *Water Planning in the Paso del Norte: Toward Regional Coordination*, the report comprehensively detailed basic population, land use, water supply, water demand, and water management information for the Paso del Norte. Water planning practices were analyzed and water plans compared. The task force's purpose was to build a resource and to support cooperative talks on trans-boundary and bi-national sustainable water management

and use in the Paso del Norte. In the four years since this resource was published, it has provided a basis for forums and discussion. It could also help provide a foundation for a current task force project, which is to develop comprehensive water planning recommendations for the regions' water authorities.

In addition, an NMSU WRI project from 2002, a GIS-based technical report intending to create a single regional map to support water planning in the Paso del Norte, has been expanded in 2004-2005. This project will help close gaps in knowledge about water availability, increase the reliable data available to decision-makers, and potentially promote basin-wide resource consideration in water planning. It could be used by water authorities throughout the region to aid decision-making for sustainable development.

Other task force initiatives are planned for the near future, including expanding collaboration with more communities and a conference for greater participation in planning.

Meetings and dialogues help to prioritize issues and anticipate holes in information. Based on these, the task force can update past projects and reports, or structure new projects to be made available through networks and workshops. These projects are a persuasive part of the foundation to support recommendations to government entities. The task force website is expanding its audience by providing the reports, meeting minutes, and citizen workgroup schedules online. Networking through member organizations and among authorities is another way the task force disseminates information.

Accomplishments: Effects Begin to Seep Down

It was the task force that put the discussion on the table about the priorities of converting water use from

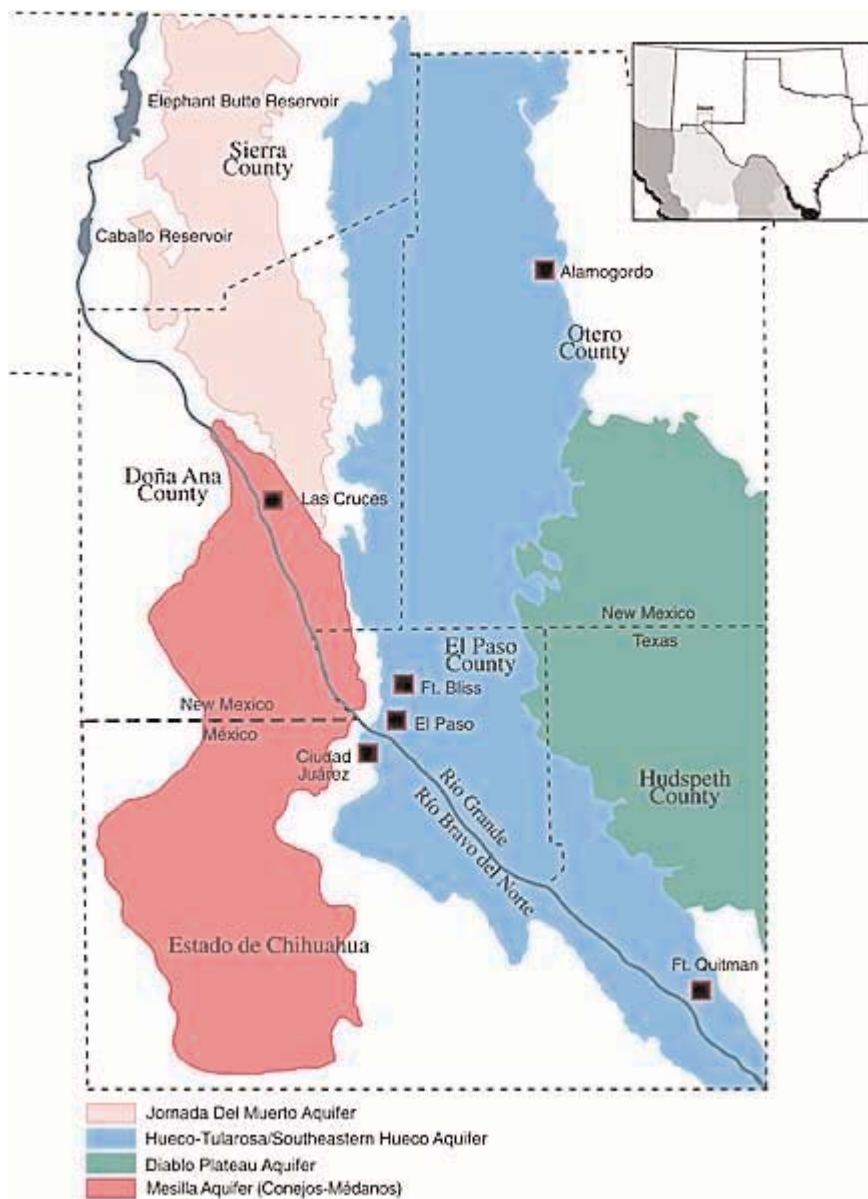
agricultural to municipal, recognizing pressures from competition between domestic use and industrial use, and resolving conflicts between municipalities using the same water sources across local, state, and federal boundaries.

The task force has promoted inter-jurisdictional consistency in local water planning, something most officials wouldn't have the resources to do on their own. Its cooperative studies and jointly determined priorities have set a precedent in this regard.

In 2000, the task force took representatives from different water authorities on a tour of irrigation districts. The

purpose was to foster understanding of differences in operations and views.

The task force has examined the linked concerns of El Paso and Ciudad Juárez in meetings, forums, and technical studies since 1999. At the El Paso Water Authority in a discussion session in December of that year, such diverse groups as the *Junta Municipal de Agua y Saneamiento*, Dona Ana County Utilities, and the Elephant Butte Irrigation District discussed the concern of Hueco Bolson depletion. Basin-wide planning was broached, as well as the need to maintain regional controls in decision-making.



Courtesy of Paso del Norte Water Task Force

The early deliberation has been carried on to recent meetings and has been reflected in cooperative study projects for cohesive Paso del Norte water planning and increased technical knowledge of regional water resources. Keeping a narrow geographic focus without also narrowing debate promotes a high level of concentration on the distinct concerns of the communities within the defined Paso del Norte.

This is evident in the latest El Paso-Ciudad Juárez disagreements over water use and pumping from the Hueco Bolson. The need for better cooperation is complicated by competing interests and significantly differing water management procedures. The two cities are diversifying their water sources at different rates and their respective conservation efforts are not consistent with one another. But open discussions in the task force provide the mediation potential for dissipating outright and impending conflict between authorities and other stakeholders.

This is no small chore. Even more is involved than two nations, two states, and two cities. Surrounding counties, communities, and farms are impacted. El Paso has based part of its water supply diversification on water rights bought from farmers in nearby counties such as Brewster and Hudspeth, while Mexico has to contend with urban sprawl that makes it difficult to extend services. Target issues include the water transfers, groundwater management, water basin information deficits, and bi-national cooperation.

Meanwhile, the task force is also looking at the bigger picture surrounding the Paso del Norte. Among task force recommendations are those for taking more holistic, or basin-wide, views of water resources, meaning both surface and groundwater, potable and brackish. For example, the International Border Water Commission (IBWC) is legally empowered to get involved with groundwater concerns, yet it has been reluctant to do so. No precedent exists in the commission for cooperative approaches to these concerns. Active dialogue is needed to initiate it, bring together surface and groundwater issues, and strengthen the organization.

Imperatives: Taking Cues from Task Force Experience

The task force is not intended to be a constraint on local planning and decision making, but some people's fear of that is a challenge for participants. It is important that the group continues to include authorities at all levels to achieve mutual goals. The task force will have greater success in making difficult changes in water management practices if authorities don't consider the organization a threat to local control. At the same time the task force will be able to push for significant modifications and promote alternative practices. The need is great for comparable information from adjoining jurisdictions and for consistency in local policies on both trans-boundary and bi-national cooperative planning.

The task force needs to facilitate a desirable balance between regional and federal controls. The fact that Mexico has heavy federal control while Texas and New Mexico have differing state controls is a constant impediment for cooperative planning in the Paso area. The three states involved, New Mexico, Texas, and Chihuahua, have common interests in the Paso del Norte. The differences in their local, regional, and state planning need to be converted into assets, rather than remaining deterrents.

Although conversion of surface water from agricultural to municipal use has begun, the task force will need to deal progressively with this issue. Potential building blocks are: starting up a network between irrigation districts, drawing from that network a series of recommendations involving transfers from agricultural to municipal use, and open dialogues on the conflicts between farming and industrial pressures.

Giving greater formal recognition to the importance of groundwater is necessary, as is enforcing accountability

for its use. The task force should aggressively promote this concern. It also has an opportunity to demonstrate the efficiency of integrating ground and surface water management in overall trans-boundary water issues and the importance of trans-boundary water issues for regional water management.

Diversification of water sources is a topic on which the task force could be assertive, promoting cooperation and improving water management throughout the Paso and beyond. It has a genuine opportunity to positively influence how brackish water is used in the future. Las Cruces, El Paso, and Ciudad Juarez all are turning attention toward brackish water as a prospective source. But they are confronted with significant infrastructure needs and potential operating costs. In addition, known significant supplies of brackish water in the Mesilla and Hueco Bolsens are poorly documented.

Participation Key to Credibility, Staying Power

The task force has demonstrated staying power. While turnover occurs in its member organizations, it has been a stabilizing force since 1999. The combination of authorities' participation, diverse membership, and citizen action keeps the task force from falling victim to special interests. While its goals have remained steady, its initiatives have grown. With that, the task force has gained credibility.

As it continues to cultivate the continuous exchange of thoughts, ideas, needs, and resources, so will it reveal secrets of multi-stakeholder cooperation in a cross-boundary setting. Its distinctive ways of considering alternative views, such as complete basin planning and joint groundwater modeling are well worth careful examination. Today's open discussion in the Paso del Norte would be less likely were it not for the organizational, research, promotion, and networking techniques the task force has applied, providing valuable lessons for other water consumers and managers facing similar issues in their own areas.

Rachel McHugh is a part-time intern at the International Relations Center (online at www.irc-online.org). She is a native of New Mexico.

RESOURCES:

Paso del Norte Water Task Force
<http://www.sharedwater.org>

Water Resource Research Institute
<http://wrri.nmsu.edu/>

Houston Advanced Research Center, Mitchell Center for Sustainable Development
<http://www.harcs.edu/mitchellcenter/>

IBWC
<http://www.ibwc.state.gov/>

Environmental Defense Fund
<http://www.environmentaldefense.org/home.cfm>

DOCUMENTS:

Preparation of a Strategic Plan and Bylaws for the Paso del Norte Water Task Force, WRRRI
<http://wrri.nmsu.edu/>

Creating a Single Map Regional GIS to Support Water Planning in the Paso del Norte, WRRRI, Technical Completion Report# 322
<http://wrri.nmsu.edu/publish/techrpt/abstracts/abs322.html>

Water Planning Report, Paso del Norte Water Task Force
<http://www.sharedwater.org/en/Projects/currentProject.htm>

Published by the Americas Program of the International Relations Center (IRC, formerly Interhemispheric Resource Center, online at www.irc-online.org). ©2005. All rights reserved.

The Americas Program

“A New World of Ideas, Analysis, and Policy Options”

Founded in 1979, the IRC is a nonprofit policy studies center whose overarching goal is to help forge a new global affairs agenda for the U.S. government and people—one that makes the United States a more responsible global leader and partner. For more information, visit www.americaspolicy.org or email americas@irc-online.org.

Recommended citation:

Rachel McHugh, “Cross-Border Joint-Management Tool Could Set Trend-Paso del Norte Water Task Force Fills Void,” Americas Program (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, August 15, 2005).

Web location:

<http://americas.irc-online.org/am/284>

Production Information:

Writer: Rachel McHugh

Editor: Talli Nauman

Production: Chellee Chase-Saiz