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THE LOWER RIO GRANDE PROGRAM

New Mexico's Environment Department and the Interstate Stream Commission are working cooperatively to develop solutions to concerns regarding the quantity and quality of the water delivered to the State of Texas. Elevated salinity in the Río Grande Project area, which extends from above Elephant Butte Reservoir, New Mexico, to Fort Quitman, Texas, has long been recognized.

The problems associated with elevated salinity are increasing due to rapid urban growth in the El Paso/Ciudad Juárez International Border area, and increasing demand for potable water. Utilization of water resources in the Río Grande Project area is restricted where highly saline water results in reduced potable water supplies, smaller crop yields, and soil and groundwater deterioration.

The SWQB has designed and implemented a salinity monitoring network in the Lower Río Grande (LRG) from 2005 to present. The network is designed to improve our understanding of salinity and the processes effecting changes in salinity in the Río Grande from above Elephant Butte Reservoir at San Marcial, downstream to Courchesne Bridge near El Paso, Texas. The LRG Program conducts water quality investigations targeted on salinity control solutions; identifying sources of salinity; focusing response efforts in this critical border region; and providing the technical basis for an effective salinity control program.

SWQB's water quality studies support recent university research that has identified natural sources as the principal salinity contributor in the area, offering hope for intercepting salinity before it impacts water supplies. In response to these findings, the Program initiated a multi-state effort to create a Río Grande salinity management program, patterned after the successful Colorado River Salinity Control Forum. Lowering salinity levels in groundwater and surface water will increase available potable water supplies in the critical Texas-New Mexico border region.

NMED and NMISC facilitated the formation of Río Grande Salinity Management Coalition consisting of water managers, the Río Grande Compact Commission, and water user groups from Colorado, New Mexico and Texas that are actively working together to reduce and manage salinity in the Rio Grande Project area. In 2009 NMED, ISC, and the US Army Corps of Engineers completed the first phase of a Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) Section 729 Río Grande Salinity Management Program which included a geospatial salinity database; a USGS Río Grande Salinity Assessment Study; and Río Grande Economic Impact Assessment study.