

Arroyo Colorado Habitat Restoration and Outreach and Education Workgroup - Joint meeting under the Arroyo Colorado Watershed Steering Committee

Meeting Summary – November 20, 2003

ATTENDING JOINT WORK GROUP(S) COMMITTEE MEMBERS – 11/20 MEETING:

Roger Miranda – TCEQ

Earlene Lambeth – TCEQ

D. J. Davis – TCEQ Region 15

Chris Caudle – TCEQ Region 15

Tony Reisinger – TAMUMAS

Don Hockaday – Coastal Studies Lab

Jim Chapman – Various Organizations/Sierra Club

Dave Buzan – TPWD

Mike Weeks – TPWD

Chris Rakestraw – Coalition to Save the Arroyo/Lower Laguna Madre Foundation

Paul Bergh - Coalition to Save the Arroyo/Lower Laguna Madre Foundation

Rocky Freund – Nueces River Authority

Joe Ramos – Rio Hondo Municipality

Lino Gonzales – City of Rio Hondo/Public Works Dept.

B. Eduardo Mendez - TSSWCB

Neil Haman - TWDB,

CALL TO ORDER/WELCOME/INTRODUCTIONS:

Roger Miranda (TCEQ) opened the first meeting(s) of the Habitat Restoration and Outreach Education meeting with a thank you to Don Hockaday who hosted the meeting at the University of Texas – Pan American Coastal Studies Laboratory located in South Padre Island. Introductions were made, handouts distributed, and the evenings' agenda was reviewed. Roger explained to the attendees that the format of the meetings would be changing, the TCEQ would be taking less and less of a lead and that the future meetings needed to be led by local participants. He explained that TCEQ was facilitating the efforts to begin the Watershed Action Plan (WAP) but steps were being made to empower local citizens and foster local involvement. The purpose of the meeting was to initiate development of the habitat restoration component of the WAP and to help build a consensus based, locally grown Watershed Action Plan to improve water quality in the Arroyo Colorado under the Habitat Restoration and Outreach and Education workgroups. The workgroup needs to develop a portion of the WAP by taking a more local initiative approach and stewardship of the watershed, encouraging local involvement.

Mr. Miranda reported to the committee members that \$200,000, for a two year period of time of CWA 319 had been identified and earmarked to hire a full time Watershed Coordinator. The position would be totally dedicated and based in the Valley and would take the lead on the development of the WAP. This funding would cover expenses and budget for officing, travel, salary, and related cost to the development and coordination of the various workgroups formed under Arroyo Colorado Watershed Steering Committee.

In addition, Mr. Miranda reported an additional \$50,000 would be dedicated to the Habitat Restoration effort that was requested by a partner agency, the TX Parks and Wildlife Department. The hurdle that is pending regarding these funds is EPA approval.

Mr. Miranda also explained that TCEQ had requested 309 NOAA funding for a feasibility study to explore restoration of riparian environment and/or aquatic habitat for the non-tidal segment of the Arroyo Colorado. This would accomplish items such as investigating the benefits of a canopy along the Arroyo that does not currently exist, bank stability, management measures, restrictions on allowable land use, habitat restoration, etc. What can be done? Items to explore would be such items as changing dredging practices in the Port of Harlingen, placement of the dredging spoils, loading and off loading of fertilizers and diesel. Mr. Miranda reported that there is a whole myriad of things that need to be looked into and studied in this area in the Arroyo Colorado.

WORKGROUP(S) PROJECT OVERVIEW

Mr. Miranda gave a brief review of the effort and history of the project. He offered information and directions regarding a meeting to be held the next day, 11/21 through the Secretary of States' Office that if new participants wanted a more thorough history of the TMDL, they were welcome to attend.

Included in the presentation, Mr. Miranda presented information on what the TMDL analysis concluded, items such as the fact that DO dynamics in the Arroyo are highly influenced by the physical characteristics of the stream. The analysis also concluded that the load reductions necessary to comply with current numeric criteria are not realistically achievable and there is need for further study.

The TCEQ proposed a Watershed Action Plan be developed and if possible, a re-classification of the impairment. TCEQ also proposed habitat improvement, and further studies to better define the role of pollutants vs. physical modifications and to define the appropriate DO criteria.

Components of the Watershed Action Plan include agricultural issues, wastewater infrastructure improvement, habitat restoration, outreach, TMDL refinement through further studies, and a review of Uses, Standards, and Criteria. Discussions were held on the Uses, Standards and Criteria differences which are still pending. Issues had to be resolved between other agencies such as the TCEQ and TX Parks and Wildlife.

The Arroyo Colorado Watershed Steering Committee is composed of representatives from different socio-economic sectors and includes TMDL stakeholders and members of the TMDL Science and Technical committees. Members of the Steering Committee participate in the decision making process. The work groups are composed of different representatives of the WAP Steering Committee plus other interested parties. They are responsible for producing the WAP and will receive guidance and direction from the WAP Steering Committee.

Mr. Miranda also included that a revamping of the ground rules will be put on the agenda for the next Watershed Steering Committee meeting.

The Habitat Restoration Work Group mission still needs to be better defined but the main goal is to improve the aquatic habitat in the Arroyo Colorado. This will be accomplished once a more thorough solidified membership and leadership of the workgroup(s) are established. Three major components that need to be addressed in the Habitat Restoration Work Group include a description of the aquatic habitat, description of the goals and objectives and the control actions and management measures needed.

Two segments of the Arroyo Colorado have different habitat issues. Non tidal segment issues are more related to bank instability and a lack of riparian environment which is by design. The IBWC refers to the Arroyo Colorado as the Rio Grande Flood Control Project and the Arroyo is a constructed pilot channel in the middle of the flood plain. The workgroup needs to work closely with the IBWC, which was recently sued for routine mowing and removing hardwood and plant growth that would give bank stability and canopy.

Suggestions were made that the workgroup should model after the Harris County Flood Control District who has learned lessons through Armand Bayou, Clear Creek, or the Dickinson Bayou streams that are allowed to maintain a riparian environment. Suggestions were made to ask IBWC to give the workgroup a presentation on their modeling and show that the riparian environment of the Arroyo is non-flexible. Comments were made throughout the workgroup that IBWC has not had active representation in the Arroyo project and efforts should be made to ensure IBWC was being represented to ensure all conclusions and policies were being considered. The Arroyo Colorado, a wastewater ditch and floodwater pilot channel, is not a natural system and is the highest and most important source of fresh water to the lower Laguna Madre, one of the most prolific estuaries along the Gulf Coast. More strides need to be made to reach a compromise and find middle ground with all concerns to ensure that fish kills are not routine in the Arroyo and that water quality is improving instead of degrading. Bank heights of the Arroyo reach 20 – 25 feet in places which effect aeration – placement of dredge spoils need to be addressed.

Healthy discussions were made throughout the group. Mr. Don Hockaday volunteered to research projects that other various groups in the watershed were making in order to possibly coordinate with for Outreach and Education. Discussions were made to possibly hire a local to make a public service announcement to assist in the Outreach for the watershed area.

A round of applause was given to the City of Rio Hondo (Joe Ramos and Lino Gonzalez) for their consistent support and work in their Public Works Department. Everyone agreed more outreach was needed and representation of other cities public work departments that have not been represented.