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Dividing the Waters

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The Rio Grande--for most of its 1,250-mile journey between Texas and Mexico--is not an impressive river. It is neither wide, nor deep, nor swift except during an occasional flood. There are places and times, in fact, where you can wade across it or even step over it.

The Rio Grande is not an especially scenic river, either. There is a breathtaking stretch adjacent to the Big Bend National Park, but for the most part the Rio Grande resembles a sluggish, muddy irrigation ditch along Texas' westernmost border.

In many aspects, however, the Rio Grande is Texas' most interesting river.

- No other Texas river, for instance, is regulated by treaty.
- No other U.S. river forms as many miles of international boundary.
- Certainly no other Texas river has as many government agencies involved in its operation.
- No other river in Texas provides water for as many acres of irrigation.
- And, unquestionably, no other Texas river even comes close to the number of legal entanglements involving its use.

The River

The Rio Grande would be a tricky river to manage even if it weren't an international boundary. It begins in the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico and travels 650 miles before it reaches Texas just above El Paso.

The amount and flow coming into Texas is set by interstate compact and controlled by the Elephant Butte Dam in New Mexico. Irrigation and urban uses in the El Paso area claim so much of the water entering Texas that most of the year the flow is little more than a trickle below El Paso.

The Rio Grande is "reborn" 300 miles below El Paso with help from the Rio Conchos in Mexico and the Pecos River in Texas. Two major dams built on the river in 1953 and in 1969 hold nearly all of this seasonal water until it is needed downstream in the fertile Rio Grande Valley.

Development by government agencies in the U.S. and in Mexico since 1905 has considerably tamed the flow of the Rio Grande. Because the river has been slowed, stored, rerouted, stabilized, dammed, and diverted, there is little resemblance between turn-of-the-century descriptions of the Rio Grande and today's river. Its flow into the Gulf of Mexico, for instance, is about ten percent of its flow in the early 1900's.

The Commission

All development and water allocation of the Rio Grande must be approved by both the U. S. and Mexico. These two countries have had treaties concerning the Rio Grande as an international border since 1848. The International Boundary and Water Commission, established in 1889, implements these treaties.

The Commission consists of two Commissioners, one from the U. S. and one from Mexico, headquartered at El Paso and Juarez. They meet at least weekly to iron out any problems involving the international boundary or the river. The Commissioners are also responsible for the U. S. - Mexico boundary from El Paso westward to the Pacific Ocean.

Field offices of the Commission are maintained at Presidio, Amistad Dam, Eagle Pass, Laredo, Falcon Dam, and Mercedes. There are Mexican counterpart offices in nearly all of these locations. Each reservoir, for instance, has two project managers and two maintenance crews--one for each side of the border. When water is to be released, managers agree on amount and time. Crews on both sides then open gates to allow equal releases from each side of the dam.

"A constant and courteous exchange of information" describes the communication between sections, between field offices, and between personnel with comparable jobs on each side of the boundary, according to a Commission spokesman. All official business at all levels is conducted in Spanish and English.

The U. S. Commissioner is appointed by the President of the U. S. and holds the rank of Ambassador. Funds for the U. S. Section of the Commission are submitted to Congress through the Department of State.

The Commission was originally charged with the responsibility of placement and maintenance of boundary markers. This responsibility soon grew to include solving problems relating to the lands transferred from one country to another because of natural changes in the river.

A later treaty made the Commission responsible for controlling and improving certain sections of the Rio Grande in order to stabilize the boundary and control river floods.

Then in 1944 when demand for water in the Rio Grande began to exceed the supply, a treaty authorized the Commission to develop and allocate the Rio Grande waters for the benefit of both countries. Since then the Commission has built two major storage reservoirs on the Rio Grande: Falcon and Amistad.

In addition to boundary maintenance, river channel stabilization, and reservoir management, the present Commission also (1) keeps records of inflows and allocations for each country, (2) monitors and protects water quality, and (3) maintains flood control projects such as levees, dams, and canals.

The Boundary

A major boundary project involving a section of the river below El Paso was completed by the Commission in the 1930's. The Commission cut a new channel in such a manner as to equalize the total number of acres transferred from one country to the other. The section of river was shortened from its old meandering length of 155 miles to a new, relatively straight, 86 miles. In all, the action relocated 5,121 acres of relatively undeveloped land.

Boundary decisions take on added importance in urban areas. A series of twin city areas have developed along the river where only the river channel divides the U. S. streets and services from Mexican streets and services.

There have been surprisingly few boundary disputes in these urban areas, but when the Rio Grande changed its course in the El Paso-Juarez area, it did cause major diplomatic problems. The dispute over how the river changed and where the international boundary should be lasted over 100 years. After much high level diplomatic negotiating, the countries finally came to an amicable solution in 1963.

The Commission then carried out a gigantic effort to move a developed urban area from one country to another. The river channel itself was moved to conform with the agreements of the two countries. Areas on either side were improved to help local citizens accept the changes. Other actions of the Commission included dedication of land to the city of El Paso, relocation of residents in the affected areas, and establishment of a 55-acre National Memorial.

Other Agencies

While the Commission does have authority over the entire Rio Grande dividing Texas and Mexico, other agencies are involved in the management or use of the river. These agencies and their personnel are often duplicated on the Mexican side of the river.

An interstate body, the Rio Grande Compact Commission, allocates water among users above Fort Quitman. The Commission is made up of representatives from Texas, Colorado, and New Mexico.

The National Park Service manages Big Bend National Park and a 191-mile segment of the Rio Grande designated for protection by the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This agency also manages recreation areas around Amistad Reservoir.

Other federal agencies with personnel working along the Rio Grande include: U. S. Customs Service, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U. S. Immigration Service, and the U. S. Coast Guard.

There are also state agencies involved in the operation of the Rio Grande. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department operates a state park on Falcon Reservoir in addition to enforcing state boating and fishing regulations on both Falcon and Amistad reservoirs.

The amount of water Texas receives from the Rio Grande is determined by the International Boundary and Water Commission, but a state agency, the Texas Department of Water Resources actually allocates the water to users. This agency has been involved in 24 years of legal battles over the water rights in the Middle and Lower Rio Grande Valley. Water rights in the river below Falcon have now been divided by the highest courts in the state and a system of permits and surveillance is in operation.

A Texas Department of Water Resources official called a Watermaster keeps daily tabs on who is pumping water from the river and how it is being used. He also takes orders for water from irrigators and other users and relays the requests to the International Boundary and Water Commission. Water users in the area between Falcon and Amistad reservoirs are still waging court battles for their rights to the Rio Grande water. THE VERDICT Boundary and water disputes rank high as the most volatile issues between nations. Solving problems of an unstable boundary and an undependable water supply has been a monumental task for the U. S. and Mexico. If the Rio Grande is viewed as an unimpressive river, it is due to a large extent to the successes of the International Boundary and Water Commission. That the Rio Grande unimpressively and undramatically marks the U. S. - Mexico boundary and delivers water to the fertile Lower Rio Grande Valley by order rather than by flood is a tribute to the International Boundary and Water Commission. The years of quiet cooperation and joint development are a credit to the two nations and their representatives.