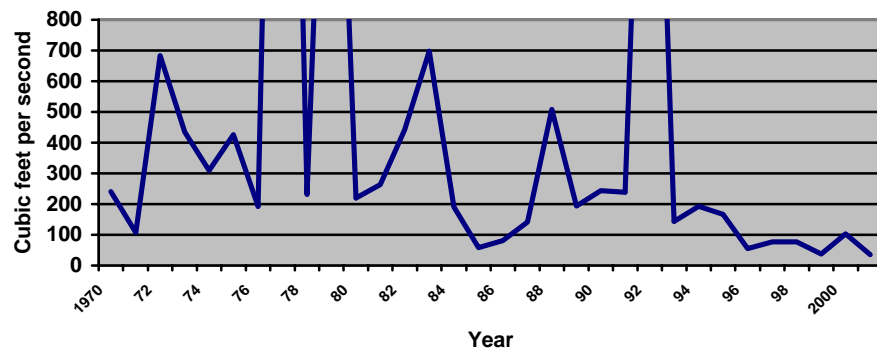


Is it too late for the Rio Grande?

What happens to the Rio Grande affects some nine million Basin dwellers. More than meeting our drinking water and irrigation needs, the Rio Grande is our natural heritage—the stuff of legend and historic significance that involves many native cultures and languages. However, few individuals are really looking beyond water supply and demand figures to the ecological necessity of maintaining river flows above the bare minimum needed to keep pumps operating and city supplies from dwindling. Current policies and projects are designed to extract every last drop of Rio Grande water for human use, regardless of the consequences to the river itself, or of the fish and vegetation that are sustained by it and which enrich our lives both economically and aesthetically.

**Average Daily Flows at Brownsville for the three-month period
(Jan, Feb, March)**



The Forgotten River Advisory Committee and its partners are dedicated to finding ways to ensure that the Rio Grande is recognized and protected for its integrity as a dynamic living system, capable of supporting aquatic life and sustaining riparian habitat. These ways include educating people about the river, commenting on policies that may detrimentally affect the river, and working together and with agencies in the U.S. and Mexico to promote more sustainable policies at the state and national level.

The Forgotten River Advisory Committee:

Rio Grande Restoration
Fairflug Adventures
FLO Engineering
Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge
Southwest Environmental Center
Texas Center for Policy Studies
World Wildlife Fund
Consortium for the Rio Grande
El Paso/Trans Pecos Audubon Society
Big Bend National Park
Rio Grande/Rio Bravo Basin Coalition

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Santa Elena Canyon, Big Bend



Near Laredo, Texas



Boca Chica: Mouth of the Rio Grande

What's Happening to the Rio Grande?

April 2001

A newsletter of the Forgotten River Advisory Committee
For people interested in the Rio Grande

Boca Chica photo courtesy Tony Reisinger

The Rio Grande: A History of Consequences

It's well known that the construction of Elephant Butte (EB) Reservoir in 1915 changed the Rio Grande forever. The graph on the right clearly shows how radically flows were altered after EB—from wildly fluctuating flood and low flow events pre-EB to a more stable regime that allowed irrigated agriculture to expand in the upper Rio Grande.

The effects of the dam are well-documented. The massive reservoir slowed free-flowing waters, causing them to drop their entire sediment load into the dam. Downstream of EB, the river scoured out two feet from the bed of its channel to make up for its lost sediment load, narrowing the channel as it dug in. When it reached a flattened stretch of terrain upstream of El Paso, the river again slowed and again dropped out sediment, piling it up in the channel.

The river's reduced capacity means it can no longer pass the flows it did in pre-dam years, and today even small floods (such as the one that hit in 1987) can be detrimental to El Paso (see graph on facing page). As it passes Fort Quitman, the Rio Grande is no longer channelized, and here begins to meander across the flood plain again, but with significantly less water.

Consequence # 1: Fort Quitman to Presidio: the Forgotten Stretch

There is little agriculture practiced in this reach, (though some report that agriculture was practiced more extensively once) and few people seem to rely on the Rio Grande for recreational purposes except rafting outfits in the Big Bend region. Most of the land ownership near the river is either private or is owned by the state of Texas and leased for oil and gas extraction, which supplies public school fund revenues. It is a remote, difficult to access and independent region. The river here suffers all the consequences of upstream damming but until recently has received little attention, hence the name "Forgotten River".

Consequence #2: Poor Quality - Low Quantity

River water downstream of Fort Quitman is of generally poor quality—the state of Texas ranks this stretch "impaired" for its high concentrations of salts, dissolved solids and fecal coliform bacteria. The Presidio to Amistad stretch of the river is also listed as impaired, for toxicity effects on organisms (though it's unknown from what toxins) and for elevated bacteria counts.

Consequence #3: Lack of Water Availability

Though there is almost no agricultural activity along the river from Fort Quitman to Presidio, crops are grown downstream of the "Junta de los Rios" where the Rio Conchos from Mexico joins the Rio Grande upstream of Presidio. In Presidio Valley, farms grow alfalfa, onions and melons. Still, water use is fairly low in this stretch. Water rights owned from Fort Quitman to Amistad total 35,318, with 98% of these being irrigation rights. However, there isn't enough water to satisfy those rights: in most years only about a third are actually exercised.

Consequence #4: The Rio Grande Sandbar

Sometime on or around February 8th, 2001, Cameron County Marine Extension Agent Tony Reisinger snapped a photograph of the mouth of the Rio Grande, completely closed off from the Gulf by a sandbar. River advocates wondered why the Rio Grande was suddenly unable to reach the ocean. Rio Grande Watermaster Carlos Rubinstein ascribed the sandbar to wave action and said the Rio Grande was still flowing. However, the symbolism is not lost on those following river ecology, and we took a look at recent flow data. The graph on the back page documents the last thirty years of average daily flows over the same three-month period (Jan-March). In the latter part of 1995, flow rates dropped below 100 cfs and remain there today—longer than at any time during the past 30 years. As of this writing, the river still does not flow into the ocean.

Rio Grande historic gaged flows

