

SURVEY OF BORDER COOPERATION, PROJECTS, AND PLANS

Along a 1946-mile international boundary, running 1248 miles in the Rio Grande through fertile valleys and picturesque canyons, and nearly 700 miles over deserts and mountains, there are no border fortresses, and no sentries, and more than 150 million people cross from one country to the other each year. The Governments of the two countries have tried, as good neighbors, to make of the boundary a connecting rather than separating line for the development of economic, social, and cultural ties between the peoples -- a place for cooperative endeavor on the part of the Governments themselves. The Governments have attempted to accommodate one another's interests, and to adjust and resolve the common problems that inevitably arise on a boundary of this extent and nature. They have thereby been able to achieve much for their people that neither Government could have accomplished alone.

Territorial Problems

Among the first problems to confront them was the movement of the international boundary caused by the meandering, erratic Rio Grande. It was surmised by 1911 that at no point except within canyon walls was the river in the same location where it had been when first established as the boundary in 1848. In 1889 the Governments created the International Boundary Commission to settle all differences and questions about the location of the river boundary, and over the years concluded a number of treaties to establish standards and procedures for the Commission's guidance. Under these treaties the Commission resolved more than 200 cases. In only two instances was the Commission unable to reach agreement. In the case of the Chamizal dispute, begun in 1867, the Governments reached an agreement in 1963 whereby the United States transferred to Mexico and to the south side of the river 437 acres from downtown El Paso. The Governments settled the Presidio-Ojinaga dispute, pending since 1907, by agreeing in 1970 to transfer to the Mexican side of the river some 1606 acres of valuable agricultural land. The latter agreement, one of the most comprehensive boundary treaties ever concluded by the United States, also resolved all other pending boundary uncertainties, and provided new procedures whereby the Commission is expected to be able to avert future boundary uncertainties and disputes.

Flood Control and Conservation of Water

The frequent Rio Grande floods caused another problem. They threatened lives and property as irrigation projects and urban centers began to develop on both sides of the boundary. Below El Paso the Commission undertook a rectification project in which the river is confined within levees and the river boundary shortened from 155 to 88 miles, entailing an extraordinary exchange of over 5,000 acres between the countries. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley the Commission devised an elaborate combination of interior floodways and levees, which has protected one of the most productive semi-tropical irrigated areas, as well as its cities, in the United States and Mexico.

As population grew in the border area, water became more valuable and an assured supply more important. The Governments asked the Commission to turn its attention to an allocation of the waters of the Rio Grande and Colorado River. By an agreement of 1906 they had already established the entitlement of Mexico to the Rio Grande waters passing El Paso, below which the Rio Grande becomes almost totally depleted, except in flood. The Commission, in a long and difficult negotiation, finally succeeded in allocating between the countries the Rio Grande waters below the El Paso-Juarez Valley, as well as the waters of the Colorado River. They did so in the Water Treaty of 1944, by virtue of which the Commission became the International Boundary and Water Commission, and the Governments undertook through the Commission a positive program for the control and conservation of Rio Grande waters. Under that treaty they have constructed and jointly operate Falcon and Amistad Dams, two great international structures partly in each country, and regulate most of the flows in the lower reaches of the river.

Sanitation

Also with the increase in population appeared sanitation problems. The 1944 Water Treaty provided for preferential attention to such problems, and the Commission chose the practical alternative of adopting joint solutions only where unilateral solutions proved infeasible. Most of the communities handled the disposition of their own wastes. On the land boundary

the Commission constructed joint projects for the adjoining communities of Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, and of Douglas, Arizona, and Agua Prieta, Sonora. Tijuana, Baja California, frequently utilizes an emergency connection with the San Diego disposal system when its domestic system is overloaded.

Water Quality

Two salinity problems introduced another problem of water quality into the Commission's purview. In the 1950s irrigation drainage from a Mexican project occasionally caused serious increases in the salinity of the river water used for irrigation in both countries. In 1961 irrigation drainage from an Arizona project, not so saline as that from the Mexican project but entering the Colorado River in much greater quantity, caused marked increases in the average salinity of Colorado River water reaching Mexico. Both Governments recognized a responsibility to take corrective measures. They have shared equally the cost of keeping the objectionable Mexican drainage out of the Rio Grande, and the United States has guaranteed for Mexico a standard of quality for its Colorado River waters linked to the quality of that used nearby in the United States.

Problems and Plans for the Future

Even as population brought problems to the border, concentration of population has created still others. Air pollution is demanding attention. Stricter sanitation standards may have to be adopted on the international rivers. Mexico, with the concurrence of the United States has channelized the Tijuana River in Baja California, so that the United States must construct works to protect urban areas near San Diego from the higher velocity of its waters. The Governments are committed in the Colorado River salinity agreement to attempt to conclude a comprehensive agreement on the utilization of groundwaters in the border area. The Commission contemplates an agreement on a division of the waters of the other international rivers, the Tijuana, Santa Cruz, and the San Pedro, all of which cross from Mexico into the United States. The Governments have already initiated studies to determine, as one possible alternative means of meeting

the prospective water deficiency in the western border region, the feasibility of utilizing nuclear power to desalt seawater in large quantities from the Gulf of California. They should continue these studies in order to develop the information they will need when they have to decide among the alternative means of meeting the need for additional water.

Thus, with the fruits of international cooperation everywhere visible as the two Governments look upon their common border, they can see ample opportunity and some urgent need for further joint endeavor.