

HARLINGEN IRRIGATION DISTRICT

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Drainage is not something new to irrigation districts. Most of the drainage ditches in the Rio Grande Valley were constructed by irrigation districts back in the early days of irrigation canal development which began in the early 1900's. As soon as irrigation canals were constructed to deliver water to the agricultural fields it became evident that drainage was as important to agriculture as water application. Consequently drainage ditches were constructed until most of the lands had some form of ability to drain the areas. Typically drainage ditches were a connection of low areas to low areas and eventually to natural drains, such as resacas or the Arroyo Colorado. As development began to occur these drainage channels were incorporated into the development plans. This worked fine until the development overwhelmed the systems. A totally developed area takes significantly more drainage capacity than agricultural lands. Ag lands absorb a lot of water in contrast to pavement and rooftops which provide immediate runoff. Ag lands can stand a little water for several hours, even a day or so, but no one wants water in or around their home for 5 minutes.

The Rio Grande Valley is unique in that the river is not an asset to drainage. Less than 2% of Hidalgo and Cameron County actually drain to the river. Valley

drainage typically is to the North and East and outfalls into the Arroyo Colorado, the North Floodway System, the Hidalgo/Willacy County drain, or directly into the Laguna Madre. Throughout the Valley most irrigation districts still maintain many of the drains that bring water to main stem drains or to the Arroyo or flood-way system. The Harlingen Irrigation District alone maintains almost 200 miles of drainage channels. Irrigation district taxes or assessments are only paid by agricultural lands, therefore developed property needs become a financial burden on the district. Thus in places where this became a problem, drainage districts were formed with the ability to assess taxes on an ad-valorem basis. The Harlingen Irrigation District was instrumental in forming such a District, Cameron County Drainage District #5 after the storm of April 1991. In areas not covered by this district we have formed partnerships with the City of Harlingen where we bill them by the percentage of drainage maintenance that we do on ditches they share with our agricultural users. No matter how drainage is handled, partnerships between entities is a must.

Valley flood management is a challenge for all of us. The main drainage outlets we all use for local flood relief are the same outlets assigned to IBWC for river flood control. Financially this makes good sense because river flooding events are so few and far between; however, when it does occur simultaneously there are difficulties with local drainage out falls. It may be physically possible to provide

adequate drainage no matter how bad the flood event, but can we afford it. That is a question we all must answer. The first effort at Valley flood management should begin with administrative responsibility. All of our public entities should be responsible about allowing development in areas where drainage is a problem.

Regional planning is an important tool that we must use as we all must be acutely aware of the impacts of waters that are outside of local control. Regional planning does not however, mean we should regionalize our drainage entities. Overall regionalization should only be a priority in areas where the impacts are common to the region. The downfall of regionalization projects is the scope of interest gets to be the “big picture” and often loses sight of the guy who floods every year or so. To give you an example we have spent hundreds of millions of dollars, much under the guise of FEMA Flood Insurance programs on levee enhancements that have not breached and we have not addressed the local flooding problems that constitute all the actual FEMA claims after every storm since 1969. Don’t misunderstand me. Levee enhancements are important and we must keep our levees safe for the catastrophic issues, but to the John Does that flood every year or so from a local 5" to 8" rain, levee breaches and storm surges that have yet to occur are not on the top of his list. Yes we must have regional planning and cooperation, but we must meet local issues at the local level. The balance of the two is a challenge we must all seek to attain.

It is important that the counties affected by the floods of the Rio Grande plan regionally for how those flood waters impact the region. However if we do not address our local issues...if we do not help the individual families that continuously suffer from flooding, we have missed the purpose for which we have come together.

Comments by Wayne Halbert, General Manager, Harlingen Irrigation District