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Cuellar Expresses Concern over Pecos Water Extraction Bid

By Bill Rovira

McALLEN, April 17 - U.S. Rep. Henry Cuellar says the proposed extraction of 41 million gallons per day of groundwater from the Pecos River watershed is a matter of "the utmost concern."

The Laredo Democrat made his views on the issue known in a letter his office sent to the Laredo-based Rio Grande International Study Center (RGISC), elaborating further that his staff has contacted Gov. Rick Perry and the International Boundary and Water Commission.

Cuellar's response followed a call by RGISC Executive Director Jay Johnson Castro for a moratorium on the removal of water from the aquifer until geological studies and environmental impact studies have been conducted.

At stake is the extraction for private sale of 41 million gallons of water per day from the underground springs that feed the Pecos River, a tributary that provides the Rio Grande River with approximately 80 million gallons of water per day.

According to Johnson-Castro, former Republican gubernatorial candidate, developer and rancher Clayton Williams wants to pipe the water to the Midland-Odessa region. Williams, Johnson-Castro said, has applied for a permit to extract 41 million gallons of water a day, or about 15 billion gallons of water per year, for 30 plus years, out of the Rio Grande-Rio Bravo watershed.

If approved, the permit would allow 45 trillion gallons of water to be taken out to the Rio Grande-Rio Bravo watershed as a result of this one application alone, Johnson-Castro said. The application is from Williams' Fort Stockton Holdings to the Middle Pecos County Groundwater Conservation District," Johnson-Castro explained.

Extracted water would then be sold to developers in the Midland-Odessa area and transported by aqueducts to that area. Johnson Castro is fearful that this extraction would be one of several more to come that would threaten the ecology of the Rio Grande and the very existence of the cities and communities down river from the confluence of the Pecos and Rio Grande/Bravo rivers, a growing area with over ten million inhabitants on either side of the U.S.-Mexico border.

Major metropolitan areas that could be affected by the loss of water from the aquifer would be Laredo-Nuevo Laredo, Roma-Miguel Aleman, Rio Grande-Camargo, and both sides of the Border in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.



Rio Grande International Study Center Executive Director Jay Johnson Castro. (File photo: RGG/Steve Taylor)

"For over a century, the State of Texas has regulated its waters based on the archaic 'rule of capture,' or 'right of capture.' Essentially, the biggest pump and pumper owns the water that can be extracted," Johnson Castro wrote, in his letter to Cuellar.

"As an advocate for the protection of the Rio Grande, Congressman Cuellar takes these matters seriously. Staff also contacted the International Boundary and Water Commission regarding this specific proposal and today Congressman Cuellar's staff called the office of Governor Perry to learn more about this issue," reads a communiqué from the Congressman's office to the *Guardian*.

The preliminary hearing for the permit application will be held this coming Tuesday, April 20, in Fort Stockton. The final decision will be rendered on May 18. Attempts to reach Clayton Williams or his company for comment were unsuccessful at press time.

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