

Running dry

Conservation is not enough; Water infrastructure needed

Recent rains in the Rio Grande Valley have been a godsend, but they weren't enough to enable local communities to ease water conservation measures they have imposed in the past month. Still, the rains help our overall water supply as they reduced the need to request greater water allocations from the reservoirs on the Rio Grande, which provides most of the water for our homes, farms and fields.

As Valley farmers prepare to plant onions and other winter crops, whatever water is available is going to be needed.

As of Friday, the Amistad reservoir held about 24% of its normal level, Falcon just 13%.

Obviously, asking residents to conserve water isn't enough. We need major changes to our water-delivery infrastructure. The fact that we've done so little to that end in the past 30 years is criminal.

The Valley has dealt with severe drought, off and on, for more than three decades. In fact, the entire decade of the 1990s was so dry that it created major changes to Valley agriculture and planning. Conditions were so bad that grasslands dried up. Many ranchers sold off their herds because they couldn't feed the animals; others burned thorns off cacti so they could be eaten. Many farmers who formerly irrigated their fields by flooding them had to invest in less-wasteful irrigation systems. Others switched to crops that required less water.

There even was talk of building more than 500 miles of pipeline from the Valley to Sabine and Toledo Bend reservoirs on the Louisiana border to provide another source of water.

Even before that crisis, many people already were calling for improvements in existing water delivery systems on the Rio Grande.

Officials now are looking for groundwater sources and increasing desalination efforts. The latter is costly, and the salty runoff it produces can affect local estuaries and their natural habitats.

Despite the Valley's rapidly growing population, about three-fourths of the water used here is for irrigation. Our irrigation systems, however, are sorely outdated; they remain primarily a lattice of large, open, unlined canals. IBWC officials have said that about 25% of the water that flows through those canals can be lost to seepage and evaporation.

That loss can add up to billions of gallons of water every year. Not only does it affect agricultural harvests and thus the Valley economy, but as people use more water than plants, as our population grows our need for water will grow as well.

At this point we might again have to think about a pipeline — not hundreds of miles to tap into Louisiana's water, but to replace our own wasteful irrigation canals. That need soon could be critical, requiring emergency allocations from Congress or perhaps the North American Development Bank to make it happen.

We can't help but think: If officials, who knew the need existed, had started putting concrete liners and some sort of covering on our irrigation canals — even just a few miles a year — the project might be completed by now.

It's time to stop delaying action; our need for water is only going to grow. Let's do what we know will help, and start investing in meeting our future needs.

NEWS ANALYSIS

← In Mexico resort, squatters make a stand against developers



PHOTOS BY EDUARDO VERDUGO/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Above: Blocks of apartments stand next to a large squatters' settlement known as October 2, in Tulum, Quintana Roo state, Mexico on Aug. 4. Quintana Roo state officials have vowed to relocate or remove about 12,000 inhabitants of the settlement, erected in 2016 on very valuable and once public land located between the town of Tulum and its beach. **Below:** People ride their motorcycles past an advertisement that offers modern condominiums for sale, next to a squatters' settlement known as October 2 on Aug. 4 in Tulum, Quintana Roo state, Mexico.

BY MARK STEVENSON
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TULUM, Mexico — Unchecked development has hit this once laid back beach town on Mexico's Caribbean coast so hard that developers are now eager — even desperate — to build condominiums and hotels in a shantytown.

While police are trying to evict squatters so towering condos can be built next to wood and tarpaper shacks, residents are fighting back, saying they are tired of foreign investors excluding local people from their own coast.

In the latest clash on July 27, police accompanying a backhoe fired tear gas and tried to knock down some squatters' homes in the shadow of a new, balconied condo building. The attempt ended when wind shifted the gas back on to officers, who retreated under a hail of rocks.

The contrast between rich and poor is stark: Gleaming white four-story condos with vaguely Mayan-sounding names and English slogans like "Live in the Luscious Jungle" and "An immersive spiritual experience" stand next to shacks made of poles, packing crates, tarps and tin roofing.

On a coast where unchecked resort development has already closed most public access to beaches — there are only a few public access points on the 80-mile (130 km) stretch known as the Riviera Maya — residents



of the squatters' camp may have reason to ask whether poorer Mexicans will be allowed here at all.

Officials in Quintana Roo state have vowed to relocate or remove about 12,000 inhabitants of the 340-acre October 2 settlement. It was founded in 2016 on very valuable and once-public land a few blocks off the main street in town and about 1 1/2 miles (2 kilometers) from the shore.

Such land invasions are common across Mexico. Many are quickly rooted out. But others gradually become integrated into their cities. As many as 250,000 people are believed to live in squatter communities on the outskirts

of Cancun.

Officials claim the "invaders" have created a semi-lawless enclave that has worsened Tulum's reputation for growing violence and threatened the vital tourism industry.

Squatter leader Jose Antonio León Méndez, a welder who has lived in Cancun and Tulum for about three decades, says he — like many of the squatters who work as cooks, gardeners and bricklayers at surrounding condos and hotels — was tired of knowing he could never afford a home in towns increasingly filled with foreigners.

"How can a Mexican be an

'invader' in his own country? That makes no sense. It's like saying someone is stealing something that belongs to him," said León Méndez. "These people are not thieves; they are Tulum's workforce."

"We do not have any personal problems with the foreigners, but they should respect our rights," he said, adding that October 2 represents a last stand for Mexicans being priced out of their own coast.

The settlement is part of a larger, 500-acre stretch of public land that was sold by city officials to largely foreign developers in the 2000s.

PLEASE SEE HOUSING, C5

