

Water rights seminar to address who gets dwindling reserves

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WESLACO – Concerns about how dwindling water supplies are distributed once reservoirs start running dry will be the topic of an upcoming seminar to be held at 11:30 a.m. March 4 in Weslaco, according to experts at the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service.



The “Seminar on Water Rights and Public Policy: The Lower Rio Grande” will be held at the Knapp Medical Conference Center, 1401 E. 8th St. in Weslaco.

Management of the Lower Rio Grande is complex and includes both state and federal agencies as water inflows from both sides of the border are combined and divided between Texas and Mexico, according to Dr. Guy Fipps, an AgriLife Extension irrigation engineer and professor with Texas A&M University in College Station.



Falcon Dam is one of two dams constructed on the Rio Grande as part of a treaty with Mexico. A seminar on water rights will be held March 4 in Weslaco. (AgriLife Extension photo by Dr. Guy Fipps)

“There are few concerns when water is plentiful,” he said. But when supplies tighten, as they are doing now, things come down to the very fine print of state and federal laws, which of course are open to interpretation. It raises lots of concerns.”

To address concerns of both agricultural and municipal users, Fipps will moderate an open discussion among three experts: Edward Drusina, commissioner of the International Boundary and Water Commission in El Paso; Bryan Shaw, chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality in Austin; and Glenn Jarvis, an attorney and chairman of the Rio Grande Regional Water Planning Group, McAllen.

The seminar is presented by AgriLife Extension, the Lower Rio Grande Valley Development Council and the Rio Grande Regional Water Authority.

“We didn’t assign specific topics to our speakers,” Fipps said. “Instead, we’re hoping to engage our experts with frank discussions with stakeholders about water rights. In general, Mr. Drusina will provide background on U.S. treaties with Mexico and how water is allocated between the two countries, while Mr. Shaw and Mr. Jarvis will discuss the roles their respective agencies have in managing and enforcing provisions. Other pertinent topics will be discussed as well.”

Brad Cowan, an AgriLife Extension agent in Hidalgo County, said water supplies are reaching critically low levels.

“The situation varies among the 26 irrigation districts in the Lower Rio Grande Valley, but many of them have already advised farmers they will be limited to only one irrigation this season,” he said. “Without rainfall, our summer crops just won’t thrive under those restrictions. And several municipalities have been alerted to the fact that in two months they may not get all the water they are entitled to unless we get new inflows, either from water Mexico owes the U.S. or from rainfall in our watershed.”

Fipps said he began holding occasional water seminars in 1991 as an education event to explore the intersection of water rights and the need for policy to ensure fair use and availability of water.

“The last water rights seminar we had in the Lower Rio Grande Valley was about ten years ago,” he said.

“While some of the water availability issues remain the same, today’s water supply situation is probably more serious than it was ten years ago. Our hope is that this seminar will help stakeholders better understand the mechanisms in place and the legal basis for allocation and management of water from this shared resource.”

Registration fee is \$30 and includes lunch. Participants are asked to either RSVP online at <http://itc.tamu.edu> or pre-register at <http://agriferegister.tamu.edu>. For more information or to RSVP by phone, call 956-383-1026. Call 979-845-2604 to pre-register by phone. Only cash and checks will be accepted at the door.