

Water district worried about access

Public land restrictions could limit control efforts

By **Marvin Tessneer**
Las Cruces Bulletin

The Doña Ana Soil and Water Conservation District (DASWCD) believes a federal proposal, designed to create wilderness and conservation areas in the county, could hamper storm water flood control efforts.

DASWCD Chairman Joe Delk said many of the dams, or earthen berms, it owns or maintains were constructed solely to protect farmlands. Since then, many residences have been constructed in the watersheds and are vulnerable to storm flooding, Delk said.

"The district is responsible for 42 flood-control dams that were built 50 years ago to meet a 50-year storm event standard and to protect farm land in the valley," Delk said. "Today, the minimum standard is for a 100-year storm even for a flood-control dam. And there are people living below the old dams, so the risk assessment is much higher."

The DASWCD was authorized last year by referendum to control and soil erosion and prevent flood water and sediment damage. Voters also gave DASWCD the authority to promote conservation, beneficial application and proper disposal of water and promote the safety and welfare of residents. DASWCD's mission also includes promoting the use of impounded water for irrigation and recreation, as well as protecting the tax base. It also seeks to preserve water for fish and wildlife, along with urban and industrial needs.

The DASWCD is affiliated with the

South-Central New Mexico Storm Water Coalition, which extends from the Caballo Dam near Truth or Consequences to the New Mexico-Texas state line. About 800 square miles of that territory lacks preventive infrastructure for flooding or erosion, according to the coalition.

Under present law, the DASWCD and coalition are allowed to maintain watershed dams, or berms, but they are not permitted to construct new ones, according to U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman's office.

A Office of the State Engineer has an agreement with Texas that New Mexico can capture storm water.

"This storm water is considered new water," Delk said. "We have the opportunity to store it in underground reservoirs or put it to beneficial use like agriculture or recharge the aquifer."

But DASWCD would need access to public lands, Delk said.

Bingaman and U.S. Sen. Tom Udall have introduced S. 1024, Organ Mountains-Doña Ana County Conservation and Protection Act, to create wilderness and conservation areas. That concerns the DASWCD board, which wrote in an open letter to Bingaman and Udall:

"With 87 percent of the county held by government ownership, the board of supervisors of DASWCD recognizes that the most effective practices can only be developed through access to the expansive lands that remain in S. 1024. With the current legislative changes and agency policy adjustments, such practices must be initiated in the upper reaches of watersheds, not in the terminus locations near residential development. Brush

control with its control of mesquite and creosote and the beneficial implications of watershed health is but one example."

DASWCD was referring to the eradication of brush to allow grass to take over, which would reduce storm water flooding and soil erosion and recharge the aquifer.

"If we don't get our act together to develop a comprehensive storm water management plan in the Lower Rio Grande Watershed, we'd be doing a grave injustice to the people in this valley," Delk said.

The key word, Delk said, is "access," access to maintain and clean out watershed dams.

The proposed wilderness legislation does not include language for access, he said. Through maintenance of these structures, the district can recharge aquifers, cut sediment deposits and reduce the spread of diseases from flooding.

In order to maintain the watershed retaining structures, the district has to apply with the Bureau of Land Management for an access permit to the watersheds, and then it could take months for approval, Delk said.

"The Legislature and federal agencies just don't get it," Delk said. "The land is our best resource. Ranchers take care of the land. They provide water with windmills and stock tanks not only for their cattle but for wildlife, too."

The wilderness bill includes modifications that would allow the Border Patrol to construct communications and surveillance infrastructure and patrol the area.

Summer cycling



Las Cruces Bulletin photo by Todd Dickson

George Pearson waits for other bicyclists to join him for a visibility ride Monday, June 6, at the Las Cruces Railroad Museum. On the first Monday of each month, the Mesilla Valley Bicycle Coalition holds a visibility ride to raise awareness with motorists about bicyclists also using the streets.

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Las Cruces Public Schools

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